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Feature: Fishermen

IT IS STILL EBB TIDE FOR THE KUALA KEDAH FISHERMEN

By: Abdul Halim Taib

ALOR STAR: The small town of Kuala Kedah was once a bastion of the state, repelling foreign aggressors like the Siamese and Achehnese forces in the early days of history.

It was also the main point of entry for the ancient traders whose ships and sailing vessels had to pass through Kuala Kedah before reaching the state capital, Alor Star.

The town today is not however as spirited as in those bygone days.

Located at only a 15-minute drive west of Alor Star, the town seems to have been by-passed by the rapid developments in the country and a good number of the residents, who are mainly fishermen, are still mired in poverty.

The infrastructures provided like the beautiful 10-km road from Simpang Kuala to Kuala Kedah with its street lights akin to those in Putrajaya seems like a misfit to the actual living conditions of the local people.

The socio-economic standing of the fishermen of Kuala Kedah has not changed much, even though the town is a ferry/boat terminal for travellers bound for Langkawi.

For these fishing folks, it is like one long ebb tide despite various programmes and projects implemented by the government to better their livelihood and create the economic impetus. Among such projects are the Tok Pasai bridge linking Kuala Kedah to Kampung Seberang Kota and houses for fishermen.

STRANGLEHOLD OF POVERTY

Chairman of the Kuala Kedah Fishermen Association (PNKK), Mohd Yusof Ahmad, said a good number of the 5,000-odd residents who rely on fishing, are still living in a hand-to-mouth existence.

"The standard of living of those who depend on the sea and dwindling catches is much poorer than those who till the padi fields in nearby areas like Kampung Kubang Rotan," he said.

Of the Kuala Kedah fishermen, 30 per cent are inshore fishermen earning an income of RM200 to RM300 a month while those working as crew or "awak-awak" (around 60 per cent) take home RM400 to RM500 a month.

The remaining 10 per cent who are the boat owners net RM700 to RM2,000 a month, depending on the size of their boats.

Among the reasons cited by Yusof for the poverty level is the inability of some fishermen to go to sea since their boats had been detained for a long period by the authorities for some offences.

"If the boats are detained for too long, the fishermen cannot go to sea which means that they are unable to pay their instalments on the loans they took to buy the boats" he said.

Yusof said many of the residents could not break out of the vicious cycle, and they could not afford even a decent home.

"The 600 houses that were built for fishermen in Kampung Seberang Kota are far from enough," he said.

Other contributing factors to their declining catches and health are the silting and garbage swamping the estuary near the ferry terminal.

GARBAGE SNARLS UP CATCHES

The rubbish floating in the waters of the fishing ground get entangled in the nets, thus affecting the catches.

Equally distressing for the fishermen is to find their moorings damaged by the strong waves coming in the wake of the fast boats or ferries plying the Langkawi run. The tongkangs with their loads of cattle, claimed to be illegal, also caused damage to their moors, said Yusof.

He said the inshore fishermen are still using the traditional hand-held methods of fishing, while the others are considered commercial fishermen.

All these fishermen are divided into four categories: the Class A fishermen who are inshore, including those using the anchovies nets. Their fishing ground extends from the shore to as far as they can go into the sea.

The Class B are fishermen who can fish from five nautical miles from the shoreline onwards, while the Class C are those who have to fish from 12 nautical miles and beyond. The last category of Class C2 are those who have to fish beyond 70 nautical miles.

Yusof said the inshore fishermen who are members of the association will sell their catches to the association, while most of those in the other categories are working as boat hands.

PROFIT-SHARING SYSTEM

The crew members of the big boats are paid through a profit-sharing system known as "panggu" where the profits after deducting operational costs like fuels and ice are divided into two halves, one for the boat owner and the other to be shared among the crew.

Yusof said among the measures taken by the association to help the fishermen is the creation of a disaster relief fund and a petrol-subsidy for the inshore fishermen by the government, which has already provided a diesel-subsidy for those with larger boats.

He said the association which was established in 1972 had overcome the problems posed by the "middle men" for the 4,100 members living in Kuala Sanglang to Kuala Sala.

The PNKK is a union of four fishermen associations in Kedah, that is, the Fishermen Association of Tanjung Dawai, Yan, Pulau Langkawi and Kuala Kedah, with a total membership of 8,000 members.

And like a downward spiral, the poverty level of the Kuala Kedah fishermen has also affected their children's education. For example, three of the seven children of Bahari Taib who lives in a one-room squatter hut, were forced to quit school because of poverty.

Bahari, 50, who has worked as a traditional fisherman for the last 38 years, said he makes about RM200 to RM300 a month. He would make less when the weather is bad.

Said Abdul Rahman, 57, an inshore fisherman in Kampung Seberang Hulu, is more lucky because two of his nine children are working in a nearby factory and could help out with the family.

SIDE INCOMES

Said who is also a religious teacher, has a side income of RM300 a month from his work as an imam in a mosque in his village.

The Kedah State Exco member for local governments and agriculture, Datuk Ahmad Bashah Md. Hanipah, said the state government has always been aware of the plights of the fishermen and are planning to turn Kuala Kedah as an important port-town in the rice bowl state.

To be implemented soon is the plan to develop the whole of Kuala Kedah as a port-town with a modern and orderly "fishing village" in the area.

The plans include the expansion of the ferry terminal, in line with the vision of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad himself.

A recent state Exco meeting had also decided to build another bridge in Kuala Kedah. That bridge has been designed to be high enough to allow ships

to pass through, similar to the Sydney Bridge, and it would be a new landmark in the state, he said.

Ahmad Bashah said the state government had allocated RM40 million as a start for land reclamation work for the bridge that would take three years to complete.

In addition, work on the RM130-million coastal road linking Kuala Kedah to Kuala Sanglang in Perlis has already started and so has the RM30-million work to widen and deepen the estuary of the Kedah River.

He said the 600 houses built for the fishermen to move in early this year, is just the start of more such houses to be built in future.

He also pledged to bring the appeals of PNKK to the government to help set up the disaster relief fund for the fishermen as well as the petrol-subsidy if they could really assist the fishing folks.

Ahmad Bashah is confident that Kuala Kedah could re-invent itself to re-capture those glorious days with governmental efforts and inputs of various facilities and amenities. -- Bernama

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