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Panel satisfied with outcome of demands

Sheridan Mahavera

SIK, Wed. - The fact that they were labelled the "JKKK Penentang Kerajaan" (Anti-Government village committee members) did not deter the elders of Kampung Sungai Batang from pressing their case with the Government.

At stake was not just their houses which they were told to evacuate to make way for the Beris Dam project, but the prospect of giving up the land that the grandparents of their grandparents had lived and died on.

And it did not help that a district officer had told them that they would not get one sen or one inch of land in return for the small holdings that they were to give up for the project.

"We really opposed this project when we were informed in 1992 about it. The Government had told us to move, the whole kampung and five others were just told to pack up and leave.

"When we asked him about compensation, he just shrugged and lifted his hands with the 'I don't know look on his face'," said Baharuddin Hassan, 47, reminiscing about the time when he and few others formed a committee to press the villagers' rights to the Government.

He was interviewed at his house in the Bandar Baru Beris Jaya resettlement scheme.

Baharuddin, who is Kampung Sungai Batang Village Security and Development committee member, said the committee to oppose the dam project had even gone so far to meet then Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad in the latter's office in 1995.

"We went to see him and he explained to us why the project had to proceed. We came back feeling dejected because we knew we had to move out. So it was back to square one," he said.

It was then that the committee decided to appeal for compensation and the members drew up a list of 14 items which they requested that the Government fulfill.

Among the terms they had asked for was that the Government compensate them for their houses and land, and that they be resettled some where close by with accessible facilities such as a school and mosque.

After negotiations with the Agriculture Ministry in 1998, the Government agreed to some of its terms.

A settlement was built, complete with a mosque, police station, clinic, community hall and school, while each household head was paid compensation for their land and house.

The 500 villagers from Kampung Sungai Batang, Kampung Kuala Sungai Batang, Kampung Batu Seketol, Kampung Teruas and Kampung Carok Tualang all moved into the new settlement in stages starting in December 2002.