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20,000 lower Bakun residents say they're living in fear after floods

MIRI, Tues. - The residents living below the Bakun hydroelectric dam project are asking the Government to resettle them on safer ground.

Lower Bakun Residents Action Committee chairman Melai Alang said more than 20,000 people, comprising the Kayan, Kenyah, Kajang, Sihan, Punan, Tanjong, Iban, Chinese and Malays in lower Bakun dam, were anxious to move.

"Now we don't have peace of mind. We are constantly worried that the Bakun dam might collapse," he said today.

Melai said the people of lower Bakun had been living in fear since a flash flood hit Belaga district on May 5, 2001.

During that flood, he said, the people panicked on hearing rumours that the RM78 million Bakun Dam was collapsing due to flash flood.

"When the rumours reached our longhouses, we felt so vulnerable and helpless. We just didn't know what to do.

"We lost all our possessions including outboard engines, electric generators and other articles during that flood," said Ugu Matu, a resident of the Uma Sekapan longhouse in Belaga.

Since that flood, he said, the people of lower Bakun realised they had no choice but to move to safer ground.

More than 20,000 "nervous orang ulu" from at least 26 longhouses and the Belaga town are "very anxious" to move to higher ground, Melai said.

"We are appealing to the Government to build resettlement areas where we can live safely and peacefully."

Melai said the people of lower Bakun desired a resettlement scheme that was similar to the Sungai Asap Resettlement near Bakun, which was set up three years ago.

The Sungai Asap resettlement scheme, located some 150km from Bintulu, is equipped with basic amenities and utilities and is connected by road to Bintulu and Bakun.

According to Melai, the Lower Bakun Resident Action Committee had also submitted a memorandum to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad in late August.

"In our memorandum, we briefed the Prime Minister about our problems, our fears and our needs."

Melai said among the concerns of the lower Bakun people were the diminishing sources of food, poor health, the Bakun dam's safety and compensation for land and crops destroyed to make way for the Bakun project.

"After the coffer dam was completed, the Rejang river became more unpredictable and unregulated.

"The water level drops very quickly now if it doesn't rain for three days.

"When this happens, we cannot even travel out of our longhouse to get food supplies and fuel in Belaga because there is no road from our longhouse to Belaga.

"We depend solely on river transport," he said.

As a result, he said, the people in lower Bakun often faced food shortages during the dry season.