

Sabah's burning tactic to evict settlers
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State agencies in Sabah have been accused of setting fire to the homes of some 20,000 settlers across the state in order to evict them from state lands.

Making the accusation is the Consumer Association of Sabah and Federal Territory of Labuan (Cash), headed by the outspoken Patrick Sindu.

Cash, in a special report based on complaints received from the settlers, labelled the state agencies as "inhumane and heartless".

The report stated that over the past two years, the state authorities resorted to burning the homes of settlers in many of the districts in the state after they had ignored final eviction notices.

Most of the settlers were retired government employees.

In many cases, all household items such as furniture, refrigerators and television sets, were also destroyed when the settlers' homes were set alight, the report added.

Most of the settlers were either away working in the farms or had watched helplessly when the state demolition teams came to tear down their homes first before setting them on fire.

Sindu told malaysiakini that pleas by the settlers went totally unheeded.

He added that copies of the Cash report would be sent to the Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and the Malaysian Human Rights Organisation (Suhakam).

The intention of the special report was to create awareness of what was going on in Sabah, he added.

"Something positive would have to be done to put a stop of the inhuman nature of the action against these settlers," he said.

Sindu added that the settlers must be adequately compensated for their losses.

Helpless politicians

Attempts by the settlers to get their local elected representatives to intervene on their behalf had failed to stop the demolitions.

Even Deputy Chief Minister and Rural Development Minister Joseph Pairin Kitingan, a former chief minister himself, had tried to help but without any success.

Despite intervention by these local politicians, the state agencies continued to carry out the eviction plans to allow companies granted permits by the Forestry

Department to move in and take over possession of the land.

The 126-page special report included photographs of settlers' houses on fire in Bukit Andrassy in Tawau; the demolished homes in Kampung Sinar Baru Gum Gum, Sandakan and in Tanjung Nagus and Mt Pock in Semporna.

The report added that many of the native settlers had been occupying the lands since the 1970s.

"They had planted crops and had applied to the government for the lands for many years but their land applications had not been approved," said the report.

Many retired government employees had used their live savings or EPF contributions to build the houses on those lands, the report said.

These settlers were first issued with evictions notices by the Forestry Department in 2006.

The report said the settlers ignored the eviction notices because they were still waiting for the outcome of their land applications. Nevertheless, companies which have vested interests in the lands started to move in.

The report claimed that the companies, aided by state agencies, started to demolish and burn the settlers' houses and seize their properties (especially their planted crops).

State government officials were not available to comment.

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