

Bukit Jalil eviction: 4 acres not too much to ask
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Honourable Prime Minister of Malaysia and MIC President,

I write you to present the reasons why the request by the Bukit Jalil ex-workers for four-acres of land is a just, reasonable and manageable one, and that you will intervene to stop the forced eviction.

I believe that if you open your hearts and minds to their request, you will arrive at the same conclusion.

You are in a position to ensure that one of the oldest remaining estates in Kuala Lumpur is saved, and to ensure justice for these ex-workers. I believe that your efforts in resolving this issue will bring praise from all Malaysians.

Tun Abdul Razak Estate House Ownership Scheme

Prime Minister, when your father was leading the country, he introduced one of the most remarkable solutions for plantation poverty: the estate workers house ownership scheme. If this had been implemented in 1973, today most plantation workers will be staying in a landed property, like the Malay traditional villagers, Felda scheme participants and Chinese new villagers.

Sadly, 90 percent of all plantations and all the major plantation companies in which the government had major shares did not want to implement this scheme launched by your father.

In fact, Ladang Bukit Jalil (LBJ) workers had as early as 1976 applied for land from the company. If their application had been granted then, we would not be faced with the problem of their imminent homelessness today.

Therefore the demand for four acres of land today, for them to build low-cost houses on, is not a new demand nor is it without basis. It would be a move of which your father would have approved.

Ladang Bukit Jalil (LBJ) would have been better off as a private estate

Ladang Bukit Jalil is also the tale of two plantations owned by the same company: The Bukit Jalil Estate Agencies (Kinrara Group Estates Sdn. Bhd). One estate was acquired by the government, while the other was not, and stayed in private ownership.

The one which was not acquired by the government – Kinrara Estate – gave land and built low-cost terrace houses for its workers. Each worker only needed to fork out something like RM 5,000 to purchase a house. Other facilities, such as temples and schools, were retained.

Ironically, the fate of the workers in the estate acquired by the government – Ladang Bukit Jalil – is bad in comparison. The workers were not offered low-cost terraced houses and were told to move to high-rise, low-cost flats.

What is even worse is, the government had squeezed the workers of their remaining labour for another 15 years without paying them EPF, Socso and retirement benefits.

Recently, the Human Resources Minister, S Subramaniam, worked out two compensation packages for the now ex-workers, amounting to RM11,000 for some and RM23,000 for others, based on the 15 years they were denied these statutory benefits.

The moral of the story is that if Ladang Bukit Jalil had not been acquired by the government, the ex-workers would have received the same, better, benefits as their more fortunate counterparts in Ladang Kinrara, and would now be living on landed property.

Why is this the case, if the government is supposed to be more concerned about the welfare of its people, compared to the private sector? Why has the government given the ex-workers such a raw deal?

For this failure itself, there is nothing wrong in allocating four-acres of land to this community.

From 1,800 acres to 26, sold off to private developers

Prime Minister, when the government acquired LBJ in 1980, the estate encompassed 1,800 acres of land. The principle underlying any compulsory land acquisition by the government is that it must be in the public interest. Yet, in the case of LBJ, it is doubtful this principle guided the decision to acquire it.

Here, the government upon acquiring the land, sold the land, piece by piece, to private developers such as Berjaya group, Island and Peninsular and Ho Hup.

Perhaps, the only buildings of a public nature that have been built there since then are the Bukit Jalil Stadium and the detention centre for undocumented migrant workers. Besides that, the LBJ land has been used to develop luxury houses, tolled highways and golf courses, among others.

While the government, was developing this land piece by piece, it did not allocate land for houses for these people who had stayed there longest, up to 80 years. They were busy selling the land and exploiting the workers for their labour – and now it wants to evict them.

Now, only 26 acres of land remain, and there is talk of even this being needed for a burial park. There is a private developer by the name of Bukit Jalil Development Sdn Bhd, waiting to acquire the final bit of land. This private company is allegedly linked to a former Datuk Bandar of Kuala Lumpur, during whose tenure the LBJ workers were branded squatters and received notices under the Emergency Ordinance (Clearance of Squatters Regulation) 1969.

Four-acres of land as a compensatory social wage

Prime Minister, as you are well aware, this country was built on the toil and sacrifice of, among others, hundreds of thousands of estate workers. Up to the 1980s, income from rubber and oil palm played a major role in financing the development of our country.

Our country prospered, and plantation companies reaped fabulous profits, but plantation workers lived in abject poverty and deprivation generated by below-poverty-line wages and the most backward of wage structures.

Four-acres of land as a social wage to compensate for their contribution towards the nation is surely not too much to ask for.

Lessons from the other land acquisition – Putrajaya

Prime Minister, it appears the government has not learned from its last major land acquisition. The government had to relocate houses in four estates to make way for Putrajaya, where the Prime Minister's Office and official residence are now located.

At that time, the government had to relocate the workers from these four estates (Prang Besar, Medingley, Sedgeley and Galloway) to Dengkil because it was then said, to them, that building low-cost houses in Putrajaya would spoil its landscape.

This clearly illustrates that the government considers its own low-cost housing as an eyesore.

Now, the workers from the estates above live in Dengkil, and the flats they live in are in a deplorable condition. Recently, an engineer from the Selangor government said that the flats cannot be repaired but have to be torn down and rebuilt.

The arguments against giving away 'free' land

Prime Minister, I am aware of some of the reasons given by the government for not giving in to the request for four-acres of land. The three strongest points put forward so far are:

1. most people have left the plantation and moved to the flats and those making the demands are in the minority;
2. the government cannot afford to alienate land in KL, which is expensive; and,
3. to do so would be to open the floodgates to more of such demands; a bad precedent.

Let me now respond to these arguments:

1. 'Most people have left the plantation and moved to the flats and those making the demands are in the minority'

The Federal Territories and Urban Well-Being Minister Raja Nong Chik, acknowledged in an official statement that of the 71 LBJ residents who have moved to the low-cost flats, only 10 are former plantation workers while the others are 'squatters'. The remaining 39 who are still living on the estate are all former plantation workers.

Therefore it is very clear that the majority of the plantation workers have stayed put in the estate. What is also true is that the government is trying to divide and rule the residents. Its offer of monetary compensation to the residents who have or are planning to move will only be given on condition that the remaining families leave their homes now.

Giving land to only the ex-plantation workers (and not the contract workers who came later) would not be a problem because this can be easily verified .

2. 'The government cannot afford to alienate land in KL, which is expensive'

In the case of LBJ, there are 26 acres of land and so allocating just four acres is not an impossible task.

3. 'To do so would be to open the floodgates to more of such demands; a bad precedent'

What is a bad precedent? Giving plantation workers land to build their own houses on? In the Kampung Buah Pala incident, MIC fought so hard that the people there should be given landed property on private land. Here, we are talking about government land. The government of Penang has built houses for the people there. Why does not the MIC put forward the same argument here? Also, in Selangor, plantation workers are no longer relocated to high-rise flats. They are given low-cost terraced or town houses.

Prime Minister, the MIC president, G Palanivel, recently suggested that urban hardship is worse than plantation hardship and that those facing urban hardship should go back to the estates.

Therefore, it would only make sense that they go back to a piece of land or home which belongs to them, as part of a community structure. Giving Bukit Jalil residents that four-acres would be a good precedent which will safeguard their history and maintain their community's way of life.

Prime Minister, recently, the residents of LBJ were forced to seek a court injunction at the eleventh hour after DBKL had refused to withdraw its notice of demolition dated March 1, 2011. And so it is still not too late for you to intervene and resolve this issue.

We look forward to a political solution for the poor. The slogan, 'people first' will only make sense if it is practised.

S Arutchelvan is a social activist and founding member of Plantation Workers Support Committee

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