

Ibans slam Najib for 'grim silence' over Jais raid

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The Iban Christian community in Sarawak has blasted Prime Minister Najib Razak for his "grim silence" over the recent seizure of Malay bibles from the Bible Society of Malaysia (BSM).

Gempuru Besai Sarawak, a group claiming to represent about 6,000 Iban-speaking congregations in the Borneo state, said the Selangor Islamic Religious Department (Jais) raid on Jan 2 (below) as a clear infringement of the BN cabinet's 10-Point agreement on the matter of Malay bibles.

"The Iban Christian community is gravely concerned that the prime minister, who was a signatory to the 10-point agreement, has kept a grim silence over this latest invasion of Iban Christian rights to religious freedom.

"We urge the federal cabinet to immediately order the release of these bibles, and to give us an assurance that Iban language bibles and other Christian teaching materials in the Iban language remain free of any interference from any agencies of state.

"This is the guarantee that was promised to our fore fathers at the inception of Malaysia," said pastor Greman Ujang, the group's chairperson in a statement today.

Greman pointed out that they would understand had one copy of the Malay or Iban language bibles had been taken in for investigation, but confiscating the entire stock at the BSM smacked of repression of their religion.

Denying Christian their bibles

The pastor said BSM is important to the bumiputera Christian community as it is their main source of the Alkitab Berita Baik (Malay bible) and the Bup Kudus (Iban bible), being the exclusive holder of the rights to import and print them.

The Jais raid, he said, has effectively denied them of new copies of their holy book and tramples on their constitutional rights to freedom of religion.

That Jais is given such an authority, he said, is "alarming".

"We consider the seizure of our Alkitab and Bup Kudus a serious and intolerable infringement of our constitutionally guaranteed right to practice, preach and propagate our faith.

"Further there appears no prospect that these seized Bibles will be returned.

"If one copy had been taken it would have been understood to be for inspection. But seizing multiple copies is a clear attempt to restrict the Iban-speaking Christians from accessing the Bible in our own language.

"Such illegal and high-handed acts directly infringes our Iban people's continued right to practice, preach and propagate Christianity to its faith community," he said.

'Bumi Christians won't be intimidated'

Najib may have called for Muslims and Christians to "look for the common ground" during his Christmas Day message last year, but the weeks following it has been far from harmonious over the name of the two religions' common god.

The Jais raid took place even before the end of the 12 days of Christmas, and shortly after, Catholic priest father Lawrence Andrew became the target of Muslim lobbyists for claiming the right to continue using 'Allah' in Selangor churches' Malay service.

Father Lawrence (right) is now being probed for sedition for making the statement, while Selangor Umno threatened to protest outside his church in Klang and elsewhere around the country.

Greman said he was "gravely concerned by the intimidation tactics mounted by Umno sponsored NGOs" against Christians.

These groups, he said, only wanted to sow "fear into the hearts and minds of thousands of ordinary Iban Christians working or studying in West Malaysia".

Undaunted, he said the community is "committed to continue praying to Allah Taala".

"We shall continue to address our creator god, maker of heaven and earth and all that is in it, as Allah Taala because we have done so for hundreds of years and there is no other form that has ever been used by us Iban-speaking Christians to correctly describe the God of the Bible."

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