

Press alliance ticks Taib off over law suit
Malaysiakini.com
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A regional journalist body today criticised Sarawak chief minister Abdul Taib Mahmud for filing a flurry of law suits against two media organisations for alleged defamation over the timber kickbacks scandal.

The Bangkok-based Southeast Asian Press Alliance (Seapa) said that Taib, a veteran politician who has been Sarawak leader for 26 years, should understand that public officials, by virtue of their position and responsibility, must be subject to a higher level of scrutiny and criticism.

It argued that the Taib could defend himself in public, which includes the right of reply that is well within the disposal of a top official.

"That course of action would have been in keeping with the spirit of democracy, instead of a lawsuit that joins many others against the media in the past to create a chilling effect on local media, deterring them from doing their job," said Seapa, which is made up journalist organisations from Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines.

Taib has filed law suits in the Kuala Lumpur High Court against independent web-based daily Malaysiakini.com and its editor-in-chief Steven Gan, as well as the Umno-owned media group Utusan Melayu, its news site Utusan Online and group editor Mohd Khalid Mohd.

The writs of summons against the media organisations were filed on Tuesday for their publication of news reports based on an earlier report which appeared in the Japan Times.

Taib has also filed suits against senior officials from the opposition PKR, state chief Wan Zainal Wan Sanusi and See Chee How, in the Kuching High Court in Sarawak where the duo are based.

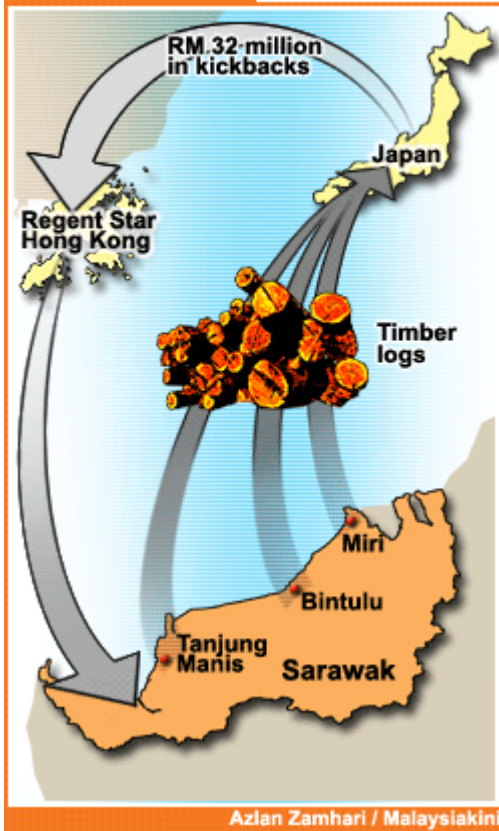
The two were accused of distributing leaflets to the public containing articles from Malaysiakini and Japan Times.

None of the parties have yet to be served with the legal suit.

No cap for damages

On Monday, Taib told the Sarawak State Assembly that he would also sue Japan Times. It is not clear whether he has filed a suit against the Tokyo-based newspaper.

Sarawak logging kickbacks



The Japan Times report, which was picked up by both Malaysiakini and Utusan, said RM32 million in 'kickbacks' were allegedly paid by nine Japanese shipping companies transporting logs to Japan to Hong Kong-based company Regent Star said to be linked to the chief minister and his family.

Taib claimed he was not aware of such payments to the said company, Regent Star.

In the 10-page statement, Taib "categorically and completely refute" all the allegations. "They are absolutely false," he said.

Last Thursday, the Anti-Corruption Agency confirmed that it has launched a probe on the scandal.

In recent years, the Defamation Act has been used by aggrieved politicians and tycoons to sue media organisations. There is no cap for damages and there have been claims of up to RM100 million.

The precedent of high libel damages was set in July 2000 by a RM10 million award to business tycoon Vincent Tan. Among those required to pay the multi-million ringgit damages was the late MGG Pillai, a freelance journalist and former columnist in Malaysiakini.

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