

**Ministry refutes findings on Penan rape**  
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The Deputy Women Family and Community Development Minister Heng Sei Kie has refuted the findings in the Penan Support Group's (PSG) report on allegations of sexual exploitation of Penan in the timber rich area of Baram valley, submitted to Parliament last week.

She said the ministry was unable to find any evidence to corroborate the claims made in the report, telling reporters at Parliament today that Minister Shahrizat Abdul Jalil herself went to Baram on a fact-finding mission yesterday.

NONE "We did not find any new cases as was alleged in the PSG report. The village headman said that there were no new cases, and so far there has been no new police reports lodged of any rape cases," said Heng (left).

While she admitted it was still too early for the ministry to conclusively say that the PSG report was wrong and the rapes never took place, she maintained the ministry found no evidence.

"However, true or not, the ministry will continue to investigate the allegations. Our concern is to ensure that the Penan women and children are not abused or exploited," she assured.

When asked, she speculated that the Sarawak government's denials were based on a lack of police reports on the matter.

Hen also conceded that the allegations caused major embarrassment to Malaysia in the eyes of the world, and must be resolved.

She denied the opposition's claims that Najib's planned working visit to Baram is only a public relations exercise, adding that there will be follow up measures to investigate, including the possible setting up of another task force.

"We will also schedule another visit to the area maybe in December to engage in dialogue with the timber companies and find the bad apples. There are many timber workers, but only a few may be involved in the rape allegations," she concluded.

Speaker: issue 'not urgent'

Meanwhile, the opposition is unhappy that the speaker has rejected PKR's emergency motion to discuss the PSG report in Parliament, saying that the government is attempting to whitewash the matter and sweep it under the carpet.

Deputy speaker ronald kiandee Ronald Kiandee (right) announced the decision at the start of Dewan proceedings today, saying that the reason was that it was "not an urgent matter" since a national task force has already been formed to look into it.

"I was shocked that the motion was rejected," said Ampang parliamentarian Zuraida Kamaruddin at a press conference in the Parliament lobby soon after.

Zuraida submitted the motion on Monday following the PSG report presented to Parliament last week.

Batu parliamentary Tian Chua added at the press conference that the rejection of the motion sends mixed signals as to what the government think about the plight of the Penan.

"While the speaker rejected the motion, the PM is going on a working visit to the same area. If they think this matter is not urgent, why is the PM going there?"

"We hope that this is not just another public relations exercise. The PM should make use of the visit to meet the victims and the NGOs who have the evidence. We don't want the PM to come back with another denial and say that everything is all good and well," said Chua.

Timber money funding cover up?

Quizzed if timber money is being used to cover-up the issue, Zuraida said, "I think it is so. Money is being used to protect those involved."

NONEChua concurred, adding that the Penan sexual abuse case is a major embarrassment for the government which they probably want kept under wraps.

"The timber contracts were awarded to cronies, people linked closely to politicians, so exposing this matter will also expose the seedy underbelly of the timber industry," said Chua (left in above photo, with Zuraidah, middle, and Wong, right).

Newly-elected Sibu parliamentary Wong Ho Leng also voiced his sadness at the press conference, that the issue was not given due recognition.

"This motion is easily the most important motion brought up in this session," he said.

Wong said this will not be the end of the matter.

The opposition, he says, is prepared to go the hilt in bringing the issue to the fore, not discounting a nationwide campaign similar to the one they organised against sports betting recently.

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