

Heritage status hollow as Malay villages vanish

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The Penang government is being haunted by the ghost of rampant development projects approved by its predecessor, Gerakan, which is putting a damper on George Town's second anniversary as a Unesco World Heritage Site.

penang world heritage town 140708 01In particular, the Malay community complains that the heritage status is meaningless if its villages and culture is not preserved.

Malay Muslim cultural and religious experiences featured on Heritage Row, like the famous Majid Kapitan Keling and Penang Muslim Museum at Syed Alatas Mansion in Armenian Street, do little to help as Malay villages gradually vanish due to massive development creeping everywhere across the island.

Villagers from Kg Jalan Pokok Asam, who face eviction by developers at the end of September, are particularly upset.

They have expressed extreme dissatisfaction that the on-going Heritage celebrations is featuring mostly Chinese and Hindu temples, and fishing communities like the Koay Jetty, and ignoring the plight of their villages.

At a two-hour dialogue session with PAS state deputy chief Mujahid Yusof Rawa in a Jelutong surau on Thursday, the villagers lamented that the heritage celebrations held in July was 'meaningless' if it did not include the Malay villages.

Kg Jalan Pokok Asam - zarus"What does it mean by heritage if Malay villages are being eroded one by one? Even if Penang celebrates Heritage Day again next year, it holds no meaning for us," said Zarus Yusof (left), a 47-year-old businessman who has lived in Jelutong all his life.

"Heritage is not just about buildings, it is the culture and soul of the people living in the state. There is no meaning to heritage if the Malays are divided," he added.

Not a racial problem

Zarus said he was not being racist to raise the issue facing Malay villagers, as the ongoing development projects would eventually affect the other communities as well, robbing them of their homes and disrupting their lives.

"We have to preserve our villages. That is the bottom line. We are not against development, relocate us but allow us to live in the same area, with reasonable housing facilities," he added.

Kg Jalan Pokok Asam penangAnother villager, Mohamad Idaham (left), warned that suraus, mosques, and cemeteries being provided for village folks risk becoming white elephants as the Malay community shrinks by the day.

"Who will go and pray if they are no more Malay communities in this area? No matter how you make the mosque, surau or cemeteries bigger, none of this means anything if there are no Malay families left to use them," he complained.

Idaham appeared a little uncomfortable with the presence of PAS, although he admitted supporting the Opposition in the last general election.

He said the group preferred to be non-partisan when pleading their case, and would meet any group who were willing to help them resolve their eviction woes.

"It's difficult if we were to rely on political parties to help us. It can cause problems because even though we live in the same kampung, we all have different political allegiances," he said after the meeting.

BN legacy

The group is demanding the developer to compensate them with a RM120,000 double storey house or a RM75,000 unit with three rooms per family.

NONE However, they insist that they be relocated in the same area Jelutong, where they have lived since birth.

Jelutong parliamentarian Jeff Ooi (right) recently told the Sun that the rapid development issue is inherited from the previous government under BN's Gerakan led by Koh Tsu Koon.

These included 36 families affected by expansion plans for Heng Ee school and more than 40 families asked to move due to a housing project at Yew Kongsi. Over 50 families were evicted from behind the Perak Road market, 17 families from beside Sri Wonder centre, and 29 households in the Jalan Pokok Asam vicinity.

"In addition, 70 households will be affected by land acquisition for a road to link Jalan Tan Sri The Ewe Lim to the Jelutong Expressway, while compensation for another eight houses for a project at Jalan Madrasah has been resolved amicably," he added.

In an immediate response, Jamek Mosque committee representative Yusof Noor apologised for any misunderstanding which has arisen out of the current situation.

Yusof, who is a municipal councillor, said he has contacted Chief Minister Lim Guan Eng and Deputy Chief Minister I Mansor Othman to meet with the mosque committee and representatives from the affected villages.

Issue to be escalated

"We really lack information when the problem happened, so I am sorry if there was any confusion" he told the group.

"But since then, we have been speaking to all quarters to try and find the best solution for everyone," he added.

Kg Jalan Pokok Asam penangMujahid (in red, in photo), in responding to the villagers' grouses, explained that as a minority community in the state, they understandably feel marginalised but that this would be no different under an Umno government.

He was referring to Umno's attempts to capitalise on the situation for political mileage.

He however agreed with the group's demand to be relocated to the same area.

"We will tell the state and developer, you can do what you like, but we will remain on this land," he vowed.

He promised to raise their issues to the CM and Pakatan Rakyat state representatives, which he said was a good channel to voice the villagers' plight.

"I will tell the state government to look into this issue seriously. Don't play a fool for this is my kampung too. I have relatives here and have lived and played here when I was young," he said.

He also apologised for the party being perceived as not willing to help the Malay community, and condemned Malay language daily Utusan Malaysia for enforcing the wrong perception.

"This is not only a Malay problem as the papers make it out to be. The Chinese and Indians are involved too, because everyone is affected by the same (problem)," he added.

Kg Jalan Pokok Asam is one of many victims of Penang's development overdrive inherited from the BN which continue to dog Lim Guan Eng's administration, including the controversial Kg Buah Pala and the Tanjung Bungah issues.

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