

Demeaning remarks blight PM's Baram visit
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ANTIDOTE Fadillah Yusof, Youth wing head of Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu (PBB), the dominant party in Sarawak's ruling BN coalition, has ignited controversy with a public statement demeaning Penan girls and women.

Fadillah suggested in a Star report on July 18 that the Penan have different sexual mores from other people and insinuated that Penan girls begin sexual relations at the age of 14.

NONEThe remarks are likely to have caused embarrassment to premier Najib Abdul Razak, coming just days before his planned walkabout in upper Baram tomorrow.

The rape of indigenous Penan communities by loggers who appear to enjoy immunity from the law has drawn worldwide condemnation.

The sexual violence has been placed in a wider context of systematic deprivation, and invasion of Penan lands by loggers and other outsiders.

Most rural Penan communities are deeply devoted to the conservative Sidang Injil Borneo (SIB, Borneo Evangelical Congress). Even in poor villages with barely enough to eat, congregations pack churches every day, and three times on Sundays. SIB doctrine proscribes alcohol, smoking and sexual promiscuity.

Najib's visit is aimed at defusing the sex abuse scandal involving well-connected logging conglomerates. However, Fadillah's remarks may now have irrevocably damaged the anticipated public relations gains from Najib's inaugural visit to the region as prime minister.

penans meet suhakam 130208 see chee howFadillah has come under immediate fire from advocates of justice for the Penan.

"I cannot help feeling cynical about Najib's planned visit on July 22. I don't think the Penan victims can expect his sympathy," land rights lawyer and PKR state information chief See Chee How told Malaysiakini.

"Worse still, any hope that the PM will address the wider context of the systematic rapes have been dashed."

'Sweeping remarks'

Fadillah, who is also federal deputy minister for science, technology and innovation, was the latest state official to repeat allegations by Sarawak land minister JamesJemut Masing that Penan sexual activity begins at a young age.

NONE"They are different from us. They might not have the same values," Fadillah (right) said, according to the news report.

He quoted an example of a Penan girl marrying at the age of 14, but did not furnish any details of this statutory rape. He did not elaborate on how "different" Penan values might cast doubt on the reports of sexual violence by loggers.

"The sweeping remarks about NGOs, Penan women and their culture are most unbecoming

and disgraceful, coming from a deputy minister who is a lawyer by training," See argued.

Sarawak's political elite have been dismissive of reports of sexual violence visited on rural communities by loggers.

This is despite one such report, released last September, being produced by a national task force led by the director-general of the Women, Family and Community Development Ministry. The task force was staffed by representatives of the police force and the Sarawak government itself, among others.

NONEIt documented sexual violence on schoolgirls, some as young as 10, by timber camp workers and lorry drivers. Loggers were reported to have kidnapped under-aged girls to timber camps while the girls were hitch-hiking to and from school.

But the state authorities have refused to acknowledge that sexual crimes are taking place, despite the reports of 15 different cases in Upper and Middle Baram being compiled during brief missions, lasting barely a week each, by the national task force and the recent Penan Support Group (PSG) fact-finding mission.

Fadillah announced that PBB Youth would mount its own fact-finding mission to Middle Baram, saying: "We will work with NGOs to find out the truth. If the rapes really did occur, we will take action."

He did not specify the NGOs he plans to work with. Members of the independent PSG mission have said the PBB has not made any contact with them so far.

Fadillah also failed to outline what action the Youth wing might take, if its proposed mission were to uncover further sexual violence by loggers.

Arrest warrants for rape survivors?

Despite participating in the national task force in 2008 and receiving reports from rape survivors in Bukit Aman, the police have said they have drawn a blank in their investigations.

They eventually declared they had insufficient funds for a joint mission with the PSG, breaking a promise made by the inspector-general last year.

Fadillah did, however, claim that PSG allegations of police inaction are inaccurate, saying the police had "taken the initiative" to lodge reports and carry out investigations. Yet not a single arrest has been made, nor a single Penan survivor been protected.

James MasingThe assertion that Penan girls and women do not hold the same sexual standards as other human beings echoes insults levelled against the poverty-stricken community by Masing (right).

"I think this is where we get confused I think...the Penan are a most interesting group of people and they operate on different social etiquette as us...a lot this sex by consensual sex," Masing told the BBC last December.

When Masing's interviewer, Angus Stickler, pointed out that a young Penan girl had told the BBC she had been beaten unconscious and raped by loggers, Masing alleged: "They change their stories (as) and when they feel like it. That's why I say Penan are very good story

tellers.”

According to Star, Masing suggested on July 9 that Penan girls and women making reports of sexual abuse might be “liars”. He demanded that the police issue arrest warrants for survivors of rape if they “refuse to co-operate with the authorities”.

“I am an anthropologist-cum-politician, therefore social issues like the alleged sexual abuse of Penan girls irk me. We must find the truth of the matter now. The public must know the truth, and punish the culprits or the liars,” he said.

The punishment of the “culprits” appears no closer today than when the scandal broke two years ago.

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