

**Penans bite the bitter pill**  
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Multi-million ringgit promises didn't cut it for the Penans, for Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak failed to live up to the hype of his much-touted maiden prime ministerial visit to Ulu Baram yesterday.

It was reported that some 2,000 people from the Penan, Kayan, Saban and Kenyah tribes spent four hours at the event - some walking two days just to attend - after word spread about Najib's pledge of more than RM100 million to complete various projects in the area.

NONE Despite the supposed aim of the visit to help the premier see first-hand the problems faced by the Penans and other tribes living in the area, it ended up being more of a public relations exercise as community leaders did not even get the chance to come close to Najib, let alone have a meeting.

Instead, he went on to pledge over RM100 million to complete the Beluru-Lapok road which connects Miri, the closest major town located north-west of the area, to the Baram district located in the state's interior.

AFP reported that another RM6 million was promised for a mini hydro-electric dam for Long Banga, where the event was held, another million ringgit to link the village to the nearest airport and RM500,000 for a mobile medical clinic.

'Najib failed to see past the money'

But community leaders felt that Najib and his administration failed to see past the money and understand what was most important to them.

Long Lamai village chief Wilson Belare said they were hopeful that Najib would at least discuss with them their problems, which they highlighted in a document handed over to Sarawak deputy state secretary Ose Murang on July 19.

The document focused on their long-standing problem with native customary rights (NCR) land, and also included education, safety and basic infrastructure such as roads and water.

Wilson said all they caught from Najib's speech was a general promise to look into road and electricity problems facing villages in Long Banga, but nothing on Long Lamai.

NONE "I don't really know what happened to the documents, because the PM did not mention any of our requests in his speech... probably, he didn't receive it from Ose Murang," he said.

In another letter dated July 22 and signed by Penan penghulu (chieftan) James Lalo, Wilson and five other village heads, the community urged Najib and his government to recognise that respect for their way of life trumped any promise of large-scale projects.

Despite the common use of Penan names for many rivers, mountains and geographical formations in government maps, their rights as indigenous people have yet to be recognised, they said.

The community leaders went as far as to say that development without consultation "brings problems, not solutions".

"The area where we make our living has been licensed to timber loggers and plantation estates, and this has forced us to change our lifestyle. We are now facing all kinds of obstacles and problems in adapting to this situation," the letter stated.

Children sexually harassed

The community leaders are also rankled by government authorities who often overlooked their opinions, requests and needs in whatever development plan that was put forward.

"The schools are built in other village settlements that are distant from ours. This has caused all kinds of problems, such as our children's absenteeism from schools that are too far away.

"Sexual harassment also happens to our children on their way to school, which causes them to refuse to go to school."

The letter also criticised the non-action by authorities despite evidence of sexual abuse by timber workers against Penan women in a September 2009 report by a national-level action committee under the Women, Family and Community Development Ministry.

At the same time, the community leaders stressed that the government's strategy of deploying a mobile national registration department unit to register Malaysians in Ulu Baram has failed as the unit only visits easily accessible areas and does not go beyond that.

The community leaders urged Najib to form an action committee to "identify the problems and obstacles" faced by the Penans and to take steps to solve the problems "directly with us".

"Members of this action committee must include government personnel and the Penan communities to ensure that all planning is suited to our needs, intentions and aspirations," the letter said.

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