

Police urged to earn Penans' trust
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A leading indigenous land rights lawyer, See Chee How, has urged the police to immediately follow up leads and evidence provided by the Penan Support Group (PSG), in order to gain the trust of Penan survivors of sexual violence.

NONESee's call to action followed a meeting between representatives of the PSG, PKR women's chief and Ampang MP Zuraida Kamaruddin, and DAP State Assembly representative for Pending, Violet Yong, with Sarawak Criminal Investigation Department head Huzir Mohamed on July 24.

"We have given Huzir some evidence to investigate and charge offenders such as Ah Hing," See explained. "The police must show to the Penans that they are committed to their jobs."

Ah Hing is a Chinese mechanic in the sprawling Kabeng camp in middle Baram, belonging to Interhill, a logging company internationally criticised for practising destructive forestry and for ignoring the rights of indigenous people.

A young woman, named 'Bibi' in the federal task force report confirming sexual abuse of the Penan last September, had made a police report in Bukit Aman in 2008, alleging that Ah Hing had raped her.

However, Ah Hing remains a free man, and has even been quoted by a local newspaper owned by a logging company, the Borneo Post, as claiming that he was her 'husband'.

When Penan villagers told NGOs that Ah Hing had already married two wives before 'Bibi', the PSG obtained evidence from the National Registration Department that clearly supported calls to investigate Ah Hing for bigamy and rape.

Misplaced optimism

According to the Borneo Post, Huzir announced, following his dialogue with Zuraida and the PSG, that the police was "expecting to meet Penan rape victims in Ulu Baram" within this week. He said he was pleased that those in the PSG with information were willing to come forward to help the police.

NONEHowever, Huzir (left) failed to mention, in his cheerily optimistic remarks to the press, that he had demanded during the meeting that the PSG, a coalition of 36 civil society groups, must pay their own way to escort the police to meet the survivors of sexual abuse.

See, an advocate for the rights of poor rural communities, including Penan rape survivors, said the police had once again broken a promise made by the inspector general of police (IGP) Musa Hassan last year, to support a combined mission with NGOs.

"The suggestion is ridiculous. It reflects the insincerity on the part of the police. The IGP promised on January 2, 2009, that funds would be made available for the joint investigation effort," he said, after the meeting with Huzir.

Ineffectual investigations

The local media have ignored the objections raised by the PSG, and have instead trumpeted police efforts at investigating the sexual violence.

"We did send a team to look for the rape victims in Ulu Baram after lodging a police report by ourselves but we couldn't find any victims there," Huzir said.

He failed to explain why they could not track down two young Penan, 'Bibi' and 'Cindy', who had traveled to Bukit Aman to lodge reports. They had gone to Kuala Lumpur, citing fears of discrimination against the Penan by local police.

'Bibi' and 'Cindy' were interviewed by Bukit Aman and the federal women's ministry task force. The police had also contributed a member of the national task force. Yet no protection was offered to the two young women, and they remained vulnerable on their return home.

NONEThe PSG has reported that police personnel did in fact visit the Baram communities of the survivors of rape, but had gone in the company of Ah Hing, the alleged rapist, to try to persuade one rape survivor to withdraw her report. According to the PSG, she and her family resisted the pressure, saying they wanted to end violence inflicted on their communities by loggers.

Despite the IGP's pledge, endless delays followed, with senior police officers excusing themselves from scheduling meetings with the PSG. Later, the police said Ah Hing's 'wife' retracted her rape report, while the PSG said 'Bibi' did so under duress.

Finally, the police announced they lacked funds to visit the affected communities with the NGOs, and ended their ineffectual investigations.

When the PSG published their own report this month of seven more instances of sexual abuse, the police and state cabinet members argued, stridently but unconvincingly, that the authorities had not been given 'co-operation' by the PSG and by the survivors of rape.

Another flurry of public relations activity by the police has now ensued.

Lack of trust in police

Many rural communities throughout Sarawak, including the Penan, have complained that the police have attacked and beaten local villagers involved in land disputes with logging and palm oil companies that boast close ties to the ruling elite.

penans meet suhakam 130208 see chee howThe police have been accused of arbitrarily arresting protestors, and using live ammunition and tear gas to crush peaceful blockades across logging and plantation access roads.

On the other hand, rural communities say, the police habitually refuse to accept reports of physical or sexual assaults on the villagers by the seemingly omnipotent companies.

"The police must show they can be trusted, if they are sincere in wanting to meet the survivors of rape," said See (right).

"Look at the way the two young women who made reports in Kuala Lumpur were harassed and intimidated. There is little, if any, trust now," he concluded.

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