

Taib Mahmud stuck in a time-warp
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ANTIDOTE Sarawak Chief Minister Abdul Taib Mahmud has courted further controversy by releasing an edited transcript of an interview he gave to an Oxford radio station during a recent marketing trip sponsored by his family.

In the interview, he rejected criticism leveled against his state government by NGOs on the 'Penan issue'.

According to Betaib Mahmud and Sarawak timber kickbacks 2nama, Taib spoke with "regret" of the attention given by "unfriendly" NGOs, particularly foreign ones, to the plight of the Penan. He avoided any direct reference to the sexual abuse of Penan girls by loggers, as documented by a federal government ministerial task force.

Taib accused the NGOs of wanting to leave the Penans "to roam the jungles like the orang utan", and compared the nomadic Penan to "animals".

Taib's rebuttal of criticism of the impact of logging on the Penan and other rural Dayaks is a stereotypical tactic: state ministers have repeatedly claimed foreigners are interfering with Sarawak's 'development' because they want to preserve the Penan way of life as 'museum pieces'.

A notorious quote by former state minister for the environment James Wong Kim Min 20 years ago was similarly contemptuous: "We don't want them running around like animals. Shouldn't they be taught to be hygienic like us and eat clean food?"

Over the years, Taib, his deputy Alfred Jabu (right) and other ministers have repeated the same mantra, that foreign NGOs are jealous of Malaysia's economic success and are using the Penan to sabotage Sarawak.

Taib himself has chided the Penan for being ungrateful, saying "the timber companies have fed the Penans".

Five years ago, Abang Johari Abang Openg (left), state minister in charge of Penan affairs at the time, promised a 10-year masterplan to relieve the well-documented poverty of the Penan. Like so many other promises of 'development', this has been forgotten.

Instead, according to a story run under the headline 'Penans being used as political pawns - Abang Jo', the Borneo Post - a local newspaper owned by the timber industry - Abang Johari berated NGOs on July 8 for making an issue of Penans raped by loggers.

"Why are you only concerned about rape involving the Penans? What is so special about it? To me, the purpose of them highlighting the alleged rape of Penan girls is more for political mileage," he said.

A call for real development

Fewer than 1,000 true nomadic Penan hunter-gatherers remain "roaming in the forest", while 15,000 others are settled. Before the advent of logging, the Penan enjoyed abundance in the forest, recognising 30 species of edible fish and endless varieties of wild game, fruit and vegetables.

The Penan maximise their resources by sharing the food they hunt or collect, and by preserving communal resources in the customary practice of molong.

In communities with access to traditional hunting and fishing grounds, many nomadic as well as settled Penan live well into their seventies and eighties. In other areas affected by logging, food security has deteriorated. Last July 3,000 Penan were threatened by starvation in Ulu Belaga when their crops failed.

Penasuhakamn communities welcome development such as schools, clinics and agricultural support, but the Human Rights Commission (Suhakam) has reported that most of them remain live "in abject poverty".

Suhakam has also noted that the Penan do not appear to benefit from the logging and oil palm industries.

Settled Penan communities across Baram and Limbang, including Long Lamei, Long Sait, Long Tegan, Long Bangan, Long Kerong and Long Sebayang, tried to make their case for real, community-based development in a letter dated July 22 to Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak, on his visit to Baram.

However, Najib left NONEafter declaring open a small bridge and making a speech to the communities. He did not receive the Penan letter, nor hold open discussions with the Penan.

The Penan wrote: "Tabi ave (welcome), we, the Penan, would like to welcome and thank (the prime minister) for taking the time to visit...the land in which our ancestors have been stewards for centuries. They bequeathed to us and our future generations the autonomy to live on this land. That was the hope of our ancestors.

"Our rights to land and natural resources are not respected. We have lived on this land rich with natural resources for centuries and it has been recorded in Penan oral histories, which have been passed down from one generation to another.

"We do not even know the time of our arrival on this land because according to our oral histories this is our origin. There are many rivers, mountains and other geographical structures in the government maps today that use Penan names.

"'DeveloNONEpment' that is planned by the government authorities often does not take our opinions, requests and needs into consideration. 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 located too far away. Sexual assaults also happen to our children on their way to school, which causes them to refuse to go to school.

"Logging activities have caused difficulties in accessing clean water supply. Schools and health centres are few and their location does not suit our communities. Our village settlements are very far from the National Registration Department administrative centres. This has caused delays in the registration of our children's birth and in turn, difficulty in applying for their identity cards."

NONEThe Penan urged the premier to form and empower a national task force to identify their problems and take appropriate remedies in collaboration with the communities themselves.

Taib's excuses, and complaints about the worldwide publicity given to the Penan, appear stuck in a time warp. In contrast, the Penan, and other rural Sarawakian communities, are eager to move forward, but remain trapped in crushing poverty.

It seems ironic indeed, that those politicians accusing the Penan of being backward, and attempting to deny the Penan their self-determination and humanity by comparing them to animals, are themselves indulging in a time-worn, primitive behaviour.

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