

Two donations - a tale of disparities
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COMMENT Over a week ago, 500 Penans lost everything when fire swept through two longhouses. Personal documents like birth certificates and MyKads which were recently issued, could not be salvaged.

Both longhouses were located in the deep interior of Kapit Division: Long Kajang was in a logging concession zone, near the Sarawak- Kalimantan border, half a day's drive along timber tracks from Bintulu. Long Luar, close to the Murum Dam site, housed 300 Penan.

In a gesture of kindness, the two timber giants operating in the area donated a princely sum of RM900 in total. This was equivalent to RM1.80 per Penan.

These companies which stripped the jungles bare of trees did not see fit to provide the Penan with timber to rebuild their homes, or offer other essential assistance.

Back in the towns, efforts were underway to help the fire victims. The Welfare Department approved a relief fund and gave a cheque for more food and other necessities such as cooking utensils, mattresses and clothes.

RM6,000 was immediately given for food and attempts were sought for the state government to rebuild the longhouses using government funds for rural poverty eradication. It hoped to secure RM40,000 for each of the affected families.

Meanwhile, Catholic priest Father Sylvester Ding in Belaga used public donations from the previous year's hunger appeal, to help the Penan.

The relief team could reach the victims only with off-road vehicles, by driving along logging tracks in a journey that would possibly take a couple of days.

Meanwhile, the Penan sheltering under makeshift huts at the site of the burnt settlements, should be pleased to know that whilst they await basic needs and sustenance, their Chief Minister Taib Mahmud, was gracing the Islamic Fashion Festival (IFF) Charity Gala Dinner in Monaco-Monte Carlo in an effort to promote Sarawak.

At a glittering banquet attended by many members of Malaysian royal families and 600 guests from Monaco's high society, Malaysia's "First Lady" Rosmah Mansor who is also the IFF patron, presented a donation of 100,000 euros (RM415,271) to Prince Albert II of Monaco for his charity foundation, the Prince Albert II Foundation of Monaco.

According to press reports, the amount was raised through the promotion of Sarawak tourism, organised in conjunction with high fashion of Islamic inspiration.

Incidentally, the Prince Albert II Foundation was set up to protect the environment and to encourage sustainable development with a focus on developing renewable energies, loss of biodiversity, water management and fighting desertification, to eliminate poverty.

Is Prince Albert aware of the large scale deforestation that is taking place in the Sarawak interior? Does he know that the indigenous people are displaced and have lost their ancestral way of life? Does he realise that state sanctioned large-scale logging and oil-palm activities have destroyed bio-diversity? And has anyone told him that Sarawak is to build 12

mega-dams which have all but destroyed the lives and livelihood of the indigenous people?

The charity dinner also raised about 170,000 euros (RM705,690) during an auction of a sculpture, specially designed IFF watch, and a framed photo of Prince Albert's visit to the jungles of Sarawak, affixed with his personal signature.

It is a shame that no one thought of passing the hat around to collect money for the Penan fire victims. Or, someone could have proposed that the money raised through the auction, be donated to the Penan.

Taib said in an informal interview, that "the promotion of Sarawak can be done through many channels, and bringing the state to the platform of the high societies of the world can be a very effective and profitable venture."

Sadly, many Sarawakians are only too aware that the only people to profit from promoting Sarawak are Taib, his family and those whom he favours.

Some of the Sarawakian sponsors who went to the ball in Monaco were CMSB deputy group chairman Mahmud Abu Bekir Taib, Kingwood Group CEO Hii King Chiong, Bosarmulu Resort managing director Robert Geneid and Hock Seng Lee Group managing director Paul Yu.

To mark the end of the fashion show, the roof of the Monaco Sporting Club Garden Hall retracted so that guests could watch a fireworks display.

It is almost a certainty that the revellers would have descended on the gaming tables in the Sporting Club after the banquet. After all, why waste a golden opportunity having a flutter at Monaco's famed casinos?

So it appears that the fireworks are not the only ones to be lit that night, for while the homes of the Penan went up in flames, the elite of Sarawak were just as happy to burn money.

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