

Kit Siang: Belaga tragedy proof Sarawak lags in development
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KUALA LUMPUR, May 29 — Lim Kit Siang has blamed the Belaga river tragedy on the failure of equitable development in Sarawak, demanding today that the matter be given top priority in the Sarawak state assembly sitting and Cabinet meeting this morning.

He said both the state and federal governments should respond to the incident immediately by offering an urgent plan to provide road access connecting Bakun, Belaga and Bintulu in Sarawak's interiors and following that, a second access to connect Kanowit, Song and Kapit.

Failing which, Lim said the Belaga boat disaster and the lack of development in Sarawak should be made a hot topic in the coming 13th Parliament meeting on June 24.

"The Belaga boat accident... should be regarded as a national disaster as it is tragic proof of failure of 50 years of development in Sarawak with still no road access to rural districts," he said.

An overloaded express boat sank in the Rajang river yesterday, resulting in 23 missing as at nightfall when search and rescue operations had to be temporarily called off.

According to media reports, 181 passengers managed to swim to safety when the boat sank at the Jeram Tukok/Jeram Bungan area, which is a four hours journey upriver from Sibul.

Initial investigations showed that the boat had been overloaded with passengers, carrying more than 200 when it had a capacity of 67.

The passengers, comprising mostly timber camp and oil palm plantation workers, were being ferried home for the coming Gawai Dayak festivities when the boat suffered an engine failure before crashing into a rock.

"The boat was supposed to have made the normal transit stop at Belaga but it did not do so as it was already packed.

"Many passengers were seen sitting on its roof, which is not allowed.

"There were more passengers waiting for it at the Belaga wharf so that was why it only stopped in mid-river to allow crew members to buy food for the journey to Kapit and Sibul," Daniel Levoh, a councillor of the Kapit District Council reportedly told Bernama.

Outraged, Lim said any probe on the incident would not bring back the lives of those who died.

The Gelang Patah MP reminded of a similar boat accident in 2010 when 13 passengers died in Tatau district, near Bintulu.

He called attention to a letter from a Shell Malaysia senior instrument engineer that was posted yesterday by an online news portal, where the dangers of the journey by boat on the Rajang river and the lack of facilities in Sarawak was highlighted.

In the letter, the writer lamented the lack of road access connecting Sarawak's interiors and accused the BN government of being incapable of providing social economic justice to the rural populace — many of whom had voted the pact back to power.

"This is a powerful indictment not only at the failure of equitable development in Sarawak after 50 years but also on the whole system of rotten political governance in the state and nation," Lim said of the letter.

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