

PENAN SUPPORT GROUP

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NO MORE DENIALS: NGO FACT FINDING MISSION REVEALS MORE SEXUAL ABUSE CASES AMONG PENAN COMMUNITIES

Following the findings of the National Taskforce Report of September 2009 (Laporan Jawatankuasa Bertindak Peringkat Kebangsaan Bagi Menyiasat Dakwaan Penderaan Seksual Terhadap Wanita Kaum Penan Di Sarawak), which confirmed cases of sexual violence and exploitation of Penan women and girls, a group of non-government organisations set out to investigate further the situation in Sarawak when informed that there were other Penan women and their families who wanted to share their stories of sexual violence and exploitation.

Furthermore the NGOs were motivated to document new evidence in light of Sarawak state government leaders' repeated refusals to acknowledge that Penan girls were sexually abused by timber workers and their apparent rejection of the National Taskforce Report findings.

The report entitled *A Wider Context of Sexual Exploitation of Penan Women and Girls in Middle and Ulu Baram, Sarawak, Malaysia* is the result of a fact-finding mission by the Penan Support Group, FORUM-ASIA and Asian Indigenous Women's Network (AIWN).

The fact-finding mission visited three (3) Penan communities and one (1) Kenyah community and listened to evidence from a further thirteen (13) Penan communities.

The mission found that women were willing to share their stories, but they did not want to go to the authorities owing to the police's lackadaisical responses in the past and further obstacles including the lack of identity cards, language barriers and the prohibitive cost of travel.

Seven (7) previously undocumented cases are described in the report. The cases all point to systematic patterns of violence. Themes include harassment, abduction, rape, physical assault, emotional abuse, coercion into marriage and desertion upon pregnancy.

The documentation of these cases refutes those who in the past rejected the veracity of the Penan women's claims.

The purpose of the report is not only to record instances of sexual violence and rape, it is also to contextualise these crimes in the political situation in Middle and Ulu Baram, Sarawak. This report further confirms that the treatment of the Penan people is intrinsically tied to the wider political situation and demands a political solution.

This wider context within which the sexual violence has taken place includes the systemic undermining of the autonomy and sustainability of the Penan people, which is caused by:

- the denial of their land rights;
- the denial of basic citizenship rights for many through a failure to register and issue ID cards;
- state neglect of their welfare including a failure to guarantee adequate access to basic services such as education and health care; and
- state failure to provide a supporting environment of the right to redress.

The situation facing Penan communities has been documented previously in various reports over the years. The impact of logging and 'land development' on the Penan communities, their land and their rights was detailed in the NGO report "Not Development, but Theft" in 2000. The SUHAKAM Report (2007) on Penan in Ulu Belaga highlights the abject poverty in which many Penan communities live and states clearly that the Sarawak state government, as the primary duty bearer, is chiefly responsible to ensure the Penan people's right to life and standard of living. The National Taskforce Report (2009), while confirming the allegations of sexual abuse, also makes reference to the poverty the community faces, as well as the lack of access to health care and education among other issues.

The lack of respect and protection afforded to Penan women and girls, as can be seen by their various experiences of sexual violence and exploitation, is tied to the lack of respect and protection shown to the Penan community as a whole.

The report provides recommendations for all sectors of the Malaysian community, including the federal and Sarawak governments, the federal parliament and the Sarawak state assembly, intergovernmental bodies, SUHAKAM, non-government organisations and Bursa Malaysia. These recommendations aim to support changes resulting in a future where Penan communities have the power to determine the direction and pace of their development, secure in their land and communities and respected for their culture, and above all, enjoy their human rights without discrimination.

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