



PRESS STATEMENT | 13 JUNE 2024

For Immediate Release

Bajau Laut Eviction: Tackling Complexity of Statelessness in Sabah

13 June 2024 - Media reports indicate that on 4th and 5th June, hundreds of Bajau Laut in Semporna district including Pulau Bohey Dulang, Pulau Maiga, Pulau Bodgaya, Pulau Sebangkat and Pulau Sibuan lost their homes following demolition by the authorities, citing concerns of security and cross-border crime.

While eviction notices were issued from May 2 to 4, the demolition and burning of houses have fallen short of upholding the human rights and dignity of these marginalized communities. Social and Economic Research Initiative (SERI), while recognising the complexity of statelessness in Sabah, advocates for pragmatic and inclusive solutions in ensuring peace, stability and order, as well as preserving the dignity of affected stakeholders.

The mishandling of Sabah's stateless individuals, with a particular focus on the Bajau Laut community has to be addressed. Reports of the torn down and burnt houses have to be investigated. Such actions not only violate fundamental human rights but also perpetuate the cycle of marginalization and discrimination towards any community.

The Bajau Laut community, a subset of the broader Sama-Bajau ethnic group, originates from the Sulu Sea and surrounding regions in maritime Southeast Asia. They are referred to locally in Sabah as "Pala'u" or "Pelaut", a cognate for 'Sea Gypsies' for their nomadic and seafaring traditions. Overtime, socio-economic pressures have prompted some families to move from their maritime lifestyle to coastal settlements. Despite their historical ties to the region, the Bajau Laut face challenges regarding their legal status. In Sabah, they are often labeled as "stateless," lacking formal citizenship rights in Malaysia, and consequently vulnerable to poverty and discrimination.

While we commend the efforts of the State Government and Chief Minister, Datuk Seri Panglima Haji Hajiji bin Haji Noor to assist stateless Bajau Laut seafaring nomads whose homes were demolished, we urge the Government and relevant stakeholders to: -

1. Establish a Special Committee dedicated to addressing the unique challenges and needs of the Bajau Laut community in Sabah.
2. Engage in meaningful roundtable / dialogue sessions with representatives of the Bajau Laut community and relevant stakeholders to develop sustainable solutions to address their needs and concerns.
3. Take immediate steps to rectify any injustices inflicted upon the affected individuals and provide them with necessary support and assistance - especially relocation to alternative housing, access to proper healthcare and education for the displaced community.
4. Conduct a thorough and impartial investigation into the alleged misconduct, ensuring accountability for those found responsible.

As advocates for social justice, we stand in solidarity with the Bajau Laut community and all those affected. We also note the concerns on border security raised by local authorities but such concerns cannot override that of human rights and dignity.

We are hopeful that the current Government will adopt a more progressive approach based on care and compassion values, implement a balanced and inclusive mechanism in addressing the root causes of statelessness and marginalization, including ensuring access to documentation and legal recognition of the rights of the Bajau Laut community.

SERI is a non-partisan think-tank dedicated to the promotion of evidence-based policies that address issues of inequality, particularly at the intersection of technology and society. For more information, please visit www.seri.my or email us at hello@seri.my.