



COMMENTARY by Sim Kwang Yang

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Women, Family, and Community Development Minister Shahrizat Abdul Jalil was clearly wrong to slam the 27 NGOs who demonstrated in front of the Prime Minister's Department in Putrajaya Wednesday morning.

Her ministry was a few months late in releasing the report of the task force set up to investigate police reports of logging workers raping the Penan girls lodged in October last year. She failed to release the report promptly, and did so only when Wanita PKR chief Hajjah Zuraidah Kamaruddin and her gang demonstrated in front of her office over the matter.

So far, no authority in both Putrajaya and Kuching has announced any plan to act on the task force report, as if they are in denial still even when the facts of the rape have been established.

Ludicrous remarks

In Kuching, Deputy Chief Minister Alfred Jabu, who is also the minister in charge of Penan affairs, was even more ludicrous when he suggested that the task force report might have been influenced by NGOs. He is obviously more interested in demonising the NGOs than in protecting and preventing Penan girls from being raped.

The 27 NGOs were just exercising their constitutionally guaranteed rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly when they demonstrated on the issue of the Penan girls. They were just doing their job in highlighting this burning issue to ensure the raped Penan girls will not be forgotten. They have shown themselves to be concerned engaged citizens and good civil society groups.

Whether Shahrizat was ready to meet them any time or not is totally beside the point. She should shed the negative ministerial attitude that every demonstration is an affront to the government and her ministry. Demonstrations like that one can actually give her leverage to use in pushing her programme through foot-dragging by other ministries and departments to help the Penans.

She should drive out to Putrajaya to the demonstration site and treated the protesters to tea and cake!

Owes Ivy Josiah an apology

She also showed her mandarin facade when she questioned the presence of the executive director of Women's Aid Organisation Ivy Josiah at the protest. She clearly does not understand Ivy can wear two hats, one as head of a special committee set by Shahrizat's ministry, and the other as the head of an NGO.

Obviously, the minister has yet to understand the fiercely independent stance of the best NGOs in our country. By mumbling about Ivy's "hidden agenda", she has betrayed her lack of understanding of our home-grown NGOs, and insulted Ivy in the process. The minister owes Ivy an open apology.

Just because an NGO leader has been appointed to a committee to help any government to do any work does not mean the appointee has sold her entire soul to the government.

The following two paragraphs on the Bernama story quoting the minister are mind-boggling:

"The minister has rejected a claim by the NGOs that Penan women and children had been marginalised by the mainstream development as a lot of development programmes had been implemented."

"The claim is baseless as it only refers to those left behind. There are others who have big houses and cars with successful children, she said."

Penans with big houses, cars and successful children?

There must be the odd ones I am sure out of their total population of about 12,000. But the minister needs badly a lesson or two about the indigenous people of Sarawak for her to do her job well.

Visit Penan country, Shahrizat

Perhaps the NGOs can take her on a trip to visit the 3000 Penans in Bakun in upper Rejang who need food relief from the outside world to stave off starvation. Then they can guide her through the forests of Upper Baram to search for those Penans with cars and big houses and successful children!

At least she has rapid transportation in a helicopter. The Penans have to walk for hours or days plus a long ride in a boat or a logging truck over punishing terrain to reach the nearest clinic!

Perhaps after such a trip, the Minister for Women, Family, and Community Development will make some allocation of money to buy special buses to help ferry the Penan girls to school, so that the girls will not be raped by logging workers who are worse than the worst of wild beasts.

Perhaps then, the minister will allocate funds for general hospitals in Miri and Sibu to have a few helicopters to stand by, to fly those Penan and Orang Ulu patients who need urgent medical attention for prompt treatment.

Then, Shahrizat can be said to have worked for women, family, and community development for those remote rural communities in Sarawak!

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