

'PRESSURED BY MODERNISATION, POVERTY'

DEPT, AGENCIES TOLD TO ASSIST ORANG ASLI

Problems faced by tribal community must be addressed immediately, says DPM

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D EPUTY Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail has directed the Orang Asli Development Department (Jakoa) and other agencies to take measures to help the wellbeing and health of the Orang Asli community.

She said the Orang Asli was faced with problems that needed to be addressed immediately.

"They (the Orang Asli) are hunter-gatherers, but their roaming areas are shrinking. They are faced with low sources of protein. On top of that, they are being pressured by modernisation and poverty.

"Their immunity to viral diseases and chronic ailments is also

suspect. Outsiders may spread diseases unfamiliar to the tribes," she said after a briefing by the National Disaster Management Agency (Nadma) following the recent deaths of 12 Batek Orang Asli tribesmen in Kuala Koh.

Dr Wan Azizah spent time meeting 10 families of the deceased and presented food donated by various agencies to them.

Present were Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs Minister Datuk Seri Saifuddin Nasution Ismail, Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Senator P. Waytha Moorthy and Kelantan police chief Datuk Hasanuddin Hassan.

According to Dr Wan Azizah, the government would compensate the families of the deceased.

"We will speed up the process of compensating the victims," she said.

"Meanwhile, those who wish to donate can contribute food items, mineral water, slippers and survival kits."

Dr Wan Azizah said the relevant agencies, including the State Department of Environment, had taken samples from rivers in Kuala Koh, and early findings showed that the water quality was unrelated to the deaths.



Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail checking the food items that will be distributed to the families of the deceased Orang Asli tribesmen in Gua Musang yesterday. PIC BY FATHIL ASRI

“The Health Ministry is investigating the root cause of the deaths. The laboratory results are expected to be available soon,” she added.

Meanwhile, Hasanuddin said police had classified the deaths of the eight victims, including four females, as “sudden death”.

He said the actual cause of the deaths would be conclusive only after the results from the Forensics Department have been submitted.

Hasanuddin said more than 200 officers, including 173 policemen, were involved in the operation codenamed “Op Batek”, which started on Wednesday.

The team, divided into three groups, had so far discovered eight bodies and skeletal remains of the Orang Asli tribesmen between 600m and 6km away from the operation centre.

They were identified as Mek Nab Tebu, 63, Jais Keladi, 55, Laila Hamdan, 20, Safia Papan, 18, Fayah Papan, 19, Din Hamdan,

18, Mohd Salleh Khaizan, 1, and Jelika Jong, whose age had yet to be ascertained.

Police are continuing their search for the remaining eight tribesmen, including those who were buried on the other side of Sungai Lebir.

Meanwhile, Jakoa has pledged to give more attention to the Batek tribe in Kuala Koh here, especially with regards to their basic needs.

Its director-general, Professor Dr Juli Edo, said this would be done after the pneumonia outbreak, which had caused 14 deaths, is brought under control.

He acknowledged the poor conditions the tribesmen lived in was due to their limited economic resources.

“For now, we have not yet discussed plans for the Orang Asli in Kuala Koh because the case is being handled by Nadma.

“Nadma will identify problems faced by the villagers. Thereafter, we will mobilise the development

plan. We will discuss with Nadma on providing the villagers with clean water supply. But I believe the state government has already been doing that,” he said when met at the Gua Musang Hospital yesterday.

Dr Juli added that Jakoa had formulated a development plan for the Orang Asli community nationwide.

He said the plan was ready, but had to be put on hold following problems faced by villagers.

“We are waiting for the right time to implement initiatives under the plan, including providing clean water supply, which is the priority.

“Over the long term, we are looking at implementing water dam projects for the benefit of the Orang Asli community.

“We will look into everything, including maintaining existing treated clean water facilities,” he said. **Additional reporting by Mohd Zulkifli Zainuddin and Ramli Ibrahim**