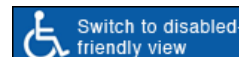




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JHEOA involved in Orang Asli conversion

4 May 10 : 8.00AM

By Ding Jo-Ann

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PETALING JAYA, 4 May 2010: The Jabatan Hal Ehwal Orang Asli (JHEOA) has been involved in the Islamisation of Orang Asli for decades, said **Centre for Orang Asli Concerns** coordinator Dr Colin Nicholas.

"One of **JHEOA's** main objective is to convert Orang Asli to Islam. They don't say it openly but their budget allocations and programmes lead to that.

"Their ultimate aim is to assimilate the Orang Asli into the Malay [Malaysian] section of society, although officially they say the goal is to integrate the Orang Asli into mainstream society," Nicholas told *The Nut Graph* in an interview.

Nicholas added that although JHEOA categorically denies involvement in conversion activities, they provide logistical support and other encouragement to missionary organisations to gain access to the Orang Asli. These groups include university students from Islamic faculties.

In the 1990s

Anthropologist Nobuta Toshihiro, who conducted fieldwork in an Orang Asli village in Malaysia in the late 1990s, said there was a clear JHEOA policy to Islamise the Orang Asli.

"...former JHEOA director-general Jimin bin Idris stated in 1990 that he hoped the Orang Asli would become fully integrated into Malaysian society, preferably as an Islamised subgroup of the Malay [Malaysian]," said Toshihiro in his book *Living on the Periphery: Development and Islamization of the Orang Asli*.

Toshihiro added that the Religious Affairs Department and the JHEOA appointed and trained 250 Muslim missionaries known as "penggerak masyarakat" in 1991. It was also announced that a balai raya would be built in Orang Asli villages, which would include a surau.

JHEOA pressure

JHEOA's officially stated primary aim is to promote the progress, well-being and advancement of the Orang Asli community while preserving their identity and culture.

However, Nicholas told *The Nut Graph* that development aid was used as an incentive for Orang Asli to convert to Islam.

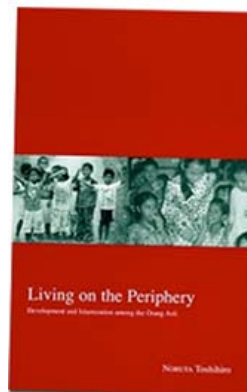
He said the JHEOA has been accused of showing favouritism towards Orang Asli who converted.

"There are reports of Muslim Orang Asli [getting priority in] receiving aid and houses. There was also an Orang Asli church that was deprived of basic facilities like water and electricity, to the extent that the Orang Asli had to go to court over it."

Nicholas said while there were some Orang Asli who converted because of a genuine attraction to Islam, these were few. "Some convert because of pressure and some by trickery, without knowing they've been converted," Nicholas said.



Colin Nicholas

Book cover for *Living on the Periphery*

The Nut Graph had earlier reported of **Orang Asli** who had been converted to Islam against their will. They claimed to have been given or promised financial incentives as a result of their conversion.

In his book, Toshihiro noted that a suspicion towards conversion activities has developed amongst Orang Asli. "Resistance to Islamisation is not, in fact, resistance to Islam itself, but to being forced to convert to Islam," he stated. "It must be unbearable to be told by others how to live, no matter how politically and economically justified it may be."



Toshihiro observed that although Orang Asli were seen as poor, and in need of development projects and Islamisation to deal with their perceived poverty, their lives had in fact, been quite comfortable.

(Pic by Ijansempoi / Dreamstime)

As Ukal, an Orang Asli man quoted in Toshihiro's book stated, "Dulu susah tapi senang; sekarang senang tapi susah."

Shut down JHEOA

Nicholas said that JHEOA should have been abolished a long time ago.

"They don't have the right motivation nor the competence needed to fulfil their responsibility towards the Orang Asli," he explained.



Orang Asli in Kampung Rembai, Selangor (Pic by Adzla @ Flickr)

"They might as well be closed down and the work given to another competent agency. The positive effect of [doing this can be] seen when education and most of the health responsibilities of the Orang Asli were handed over to the respective ministries in the mid-1990s."

Nicholas said what was more damaging was how the JHEOA is used to control the Orang Asli.

For example, he said that JHEOA has purported to speak on behalf of the Orang Asli, without proper consultation with them.

"When it comes to issues like Orang Asli land being taken away, JHEOA always sides with the government. It sees itself more as a government agency, rather than one that is compelled by law to protect and advance the interests of the Orang Asli," he said.

The Nut Graph contacted JHEOA director-general Datuk Mohd Sani Mistam's office for a response to the allegations of conversion activities by JHEOA staff.

However, *The Nut Graph* was informed that he was attending a Kursus Kempimpinan Pengurusan Utama from 26 April to 17 May. *The Nut Graph* is awaiting a response to a request for deputy director-general Nisra Nisran Asra Ramlan to respond on the director-general's behalf. 🇲🇾



Mohd Sani
(source: jheoa.gov.my)

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