

# Helping hands for a flood-hit community



By YAP SU-YIN  
IN MERSING (JOHOR)

HOME for Lop and his aboriginal community of orang asli used to be a village named Kampung Peta in the heart of peninsular Malaysia's Endau-Rompin National Park.

But life as they knew it barely months ago is no more. The place was devastated in the floods of December and January.

Homes and vegetation were submerged under 12m of water when the Endau River, which skirts the kampung, broke its banks.

The village's only jetty was destroyed. Along with it, one of the orang asli's sources of income - as paid guides to visitors - was also washed away.

The floods also drowned their cattle and poultry, and robbed them of their crops, said Lop, a stocky 26-year-old with long matted hair bunched at his nape.

Even his father, the deputy head of the village, was powerless to help the people get back on their feet.

But aid has come from the outside world in the form of the Malaysian Red Crescent Society volunteers, who have a plan to rebuild the village, one of the more remote aboriginal settlements in Johor.

Plans have also been drawn up to equip the people with sustainable means of making a living.

Last month, the Red Crescent's plans received a boost through a donation of RM300,000 (S\$130,000) from the Tan Chin Tuan Foundation, one of Singapore's leading family-founded philanthropic foundations.

The Red Crescent volunteers, alerted to the orang asli's plight by the Malaysian Department of Abori-

ginal Affairs, had driven a bumpy 200km from Johor Baru to deliver mattresses, food and sundry supplies.

Kampung Peta is home to about 400 orang asli - half are adults, a third are children and the rest, the elderly.

Living in a remote area 60km away from the nearest town, Kahang, the orang asli had got by for years without electricity, piped water or healthcare facilities.

Before the floods, they had already been living hand-to-mouth, eating the vegetables they grew and supplementing this with jungle and river produce such as roots, fish, snakes and frogs as well as earning side income as guides and trekkers for visitors to the national park.

Seeing the plight they were in, the deputy chairman of the Red Crescent's Johor Baru chapter, Mr Velasamy Pillai, who led the team into the village, said they knew "more could and had to be done".

On the society's to-do list: setting up infrastructure for clean water and sanitation, a field clinic for healthcare, building new homes and replacing the jetty.

Also, there is a need to kick-start nutrition programmes and teach the orang asli disaster-management and rehabilitation skills so they will know how to bounce back should disaster strike again.

The stricken community needs seeds for new crops, new livestock and lessons in improving their handicraft skills and selling their handicraft.

Mr Velasamy said that if Kampung Peta's fortunes could be turned around successfully, the lives of other orang asli communities in the area could also be improved.

The big stumbling block: funding, or the lack thereof.

Fortunately, when Mr Velasamy took a team of volunteers on a reconnaissance trip to assess the situation, the chief executive of Singapore's Tan Chin Tuan Foundation, Mr Eric Teng, tagged along.

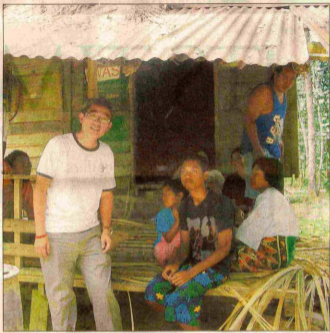


PHOTO: YAP SU-YIN

KEY-OPENER: Tan Chin Tuan Foundation chief executive Eric Teng (left) got a first-hand look at the situation in Kampung Peta during a recon trip and saw how critical the villagers' needs were.



PHOTO: TAN CHIN TUAN FOUNDATION

A NEIGHBOUR CHIPS IN: (from left) Tan Chin Tuan Foundation deputy chairman Chew Gek Khim and Mr Teng present a cheque to Malaysian Red Crescent Society deputy chairman Nisham Hashim and community services committee chairman Raja Zarith Sofiah.

Mr Teng saw for himself just how critical the kampung's needs were, and decided that the Red Crescent effort deserved support.

Things moved quickly after that. Last month, the foundation's Malaysian arm handed over a cheque for RM300,000 to the Red Crescent society, to start its RM1.5 million Kampung Peta Orang Asli project, which is expected to be completed a year from now.

The lump sum donation was the largest from a single donor the society had received for its flood-related projects in Johor.

Mr Teng said that its credible rehabilitation plan was the clincher, as it went beyond simply dishing out quick aid, and aimed for im-

provements that would have long-term social impact on the orang asli community.

He said: "This doesn't end with us giving the cheque but starts with the giving of the cheque. We're kindling a gotong-royong (mutual-help) spirit, influencing groups keen on community outreach to band together so the good work continues."

Singapore's friendship with Malaysia was an important factor in expediting the help, said the foundation's deputy chairman, Ms Chew Gek Khim, whose late grandfather Tan Chin Tuan started the foundation.

"We couldn't sit by and do nothing. We intend to give to other deserving projects in the Asean region, but first, we want to assist our closest neighbour, Johor," she said.

The foundation has also hooked up the Red Crescent Society with the Buddhist non-profit group Soka Gakkai, for more helping hands for the project.

Soka Gakkai in Johor will receive RM60,000 from the foundation to distribute school stationery to needy students whose school supplies were destroyed by the floods.

The way the exercise has blossomed from a relief-work project into a developmental one has been heartening for volunteers and officials alike.

Mr Abdul Aziz Nqah from the Department of Aboriginal Affairs said the help rendered so far has been a big psychological boost for the orang asli, who can see that others care for them.

Beyond rebuilding their wrecked community, there is more to be done in the long term, he said.

One challenge lies in changing the nomadic life-style of the aboriginal folk.

"If they can be persuaded to settle down and maximise the infrastructure and skills that will be passed on to them, their community will be able to grow from strength to strength," said Mr Abdul Aziz.