

# SLEEPLESS NIGHTS SINCE BALING FLOODS

Villagers irked by slow pace of repairs and living in fear of another flood

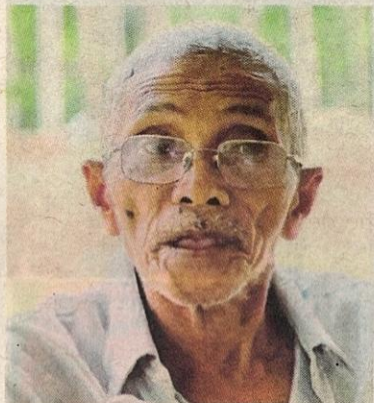
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“THIS is my home. I have been living here since I was 5. I am not going anywhere. Just tell them (the authorities) to clean up the river quickly.”

For Mahmud Rejab, 75, whose house sits metres away from Sungai Kupang, the fear of losing his house to floods in the future haunts him daily.

Mahmud said with no swift action taken by the authorities, he didn't feel safe.

“I am used to flash floods. All these years, they never affected



Mahmud Rejab

my home.”

During the massive floods that ravaged Kampung Iboi and 11 other villages in Kupang on July 4, Mahmud's semi-wooden house was one of the worst hit.

He almost lost his life after being swept away by raging currents while wading through deep waters to get to his wife, Halifah Ahmad, 67, who was trapped in the house.

He said he clung to a betel nut



Azman Yusof

tree in his lawn.

“My wife hung on to the roofing pillar for almost 30 minutes. If she had to hold on any longer, she would have been swept away,” Mahmud told the *New Straits Times*.

During the interview, carpenters hired by a non-governmental organisation were busy fixing the house.

It has been more than three weeks since the tragedy struck, but Mahmud said he felt



Excavators removing sand and mud in Sungai Kupang, Baling, recently. PIX BY ADIE ZULKIFLI

river currents.”

He said this after checking the Bailey bridge built to temporarily replace a concrete bridge destroyed by the currents.

In the worst-ever flood in Kupang, three people in a family were killed, including a pregnant woman in Kampung Iboi.

More than 800 houses in 12 villages were inundated.

Strong currents swept away 16 houses, seriously damaged 18 homes and left more than 700

vested when the flood hit. Everything was washed away. The retaining brick wall collapsed and a hut at the pond was also destroyed.”

Azman, whose BokBak Aqua Venture has been in operation for the past five years, said officers from the Malaysian Fisheries Development Authority offered some assistance to him when they visited recently.

“It may take months to rebuild the business.”



Azman Yusof, of Kampung Bok Bak, at his catfish pond that was damaged by the floods.

afraid whenever it rained, which has been frequent recently.

"The river has mud sediments from the flood, so it is still shallow.

"It overflows when it rains. We are having sleepless nights because of this.

"Why are the authorities taking so long to deepen the riverbed?"

The incident also led to water pollution for the major stream in Gunung Inas, which provided water for the villagers.

He said the water was once clear and could be used for drinking and cooking. Now, it is murky with the colour of *teh tarik* (pulled milk tea).

Not far from Mahmud's home, three excavators engaged by the Department of Drainage and Irrigation were digging out tonnes of sand and mud washed down from upstream Gunung Inas, where the water surge that triggered the floods started.

The villagers, who are angry with the slow pace of repairs, said the excavation works did not deepen the riverbed.

Kampung Iboi Village Development and Security Committee secretary Nor Mohamad Che Hussain said the villagers did not feel safe as long as piles of mud and sand were lodged in the riverbank.

"The sand along the riverbank gets washed away easily by the

homes with minor damage.

Mohamad said the flood affected the livelihood of many villagers when their orchards were damaged.

"The flood destroyed four other bridges and damaged access roads to the villages. Rubber estates and orchards were also damaged, affecting people's livelihood," he said.

In Kampung Bok Bak, 2km away from here, Azman Yusof, 59, who operates a catfish farm, said his losses were about RM50,000.

"The fish were about to be har-

Azman said he hoped the river clean-up could be quickened before another tragedy struck.

"As long as the river remains shallow, as it is now, I cannot restart my business.

"Otherwise, another flood could end it."

Like other villagers in Kupang, Azman believed that the Musang King plantation on Gunung Inas should be shut down.

This follows the finding by federal agencies that the floods were triggered by a burst reservoir at the plantation.



Muddy Sungai Kupang water flowing past Kampung Iboi in Kupang, Baling.