

# Borneo fire devastates thousands of Malaysia's poorest people

Mike Head  
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A catastrophic blaze destroyed about 1,000 makeshift homes and displaced almost 10,000 residents in a coastal village in Malaysia's Sabah state in the early hours of Sunday. The tragedy underscores the plight of hundreds of thousands of people living in shanty settlements in both the Malaysian and Indonesian parts of the island of Borneo.

Kampung Bahagia, near the port city of Sandakan on the northern tip of Borneo, is one of Sabah's densely-populated so-called water villages—which consist of highly inflammable houses made of wood and board built on stilts—housing some of Malaysia's poorest people, including many stateless and indigenous groups.

Authorities were notified of the fire about 1:30 a.m. and about 35 firefighters arrived 20 minutes later, according to media reports. Sandakan district's fire and rescue chief Jimmy Lagung said strong winds and the close proximity of the houses caused the fire to spread rapidly and made access difficult. The inferno was not extinguished until noon—over 10 hours later.

Drone footage of the scene shows almost total destruction covering more than four hectares, or about 10 acres, of densely packed homes. Houses are no longer recognisable structures, just charred debris, as if the fire had quickly flattened the entire area.

No deaths have been reported yet, but some people were injured, Sandakan police said, according to the Malaysian state news agency Bernama. Police dismissed social media reports claiming lives were lost.

Fire authorities are still investigating the cause of the disaster but a local news outlet, the *Daily Express*, reported that the village head, Sharif Hashim Sharif Iting, said the blaze began in a house where someone lost control of the fire in a gas stove while cooking.

Sharif said hundreds of residents rushed to fight the fire while waiting for the fire brigade to arrive, but their efforts proved futile. "The situation was made worse by

the closeness of the wooden-structured houses, lack of water supply, and strong wind," he told reporters at the scene. He added that the chaotic conditions, with thousands of residents scrambling to flee, left most families with no time to salvage their belongings.

Sharif described the incident as the worst fire ever recorded in Kampung Bahagia, surpassing two previous blazes in the village's history. "This is the third fire. The first was in 1999 and the second in 2001, but neither came close to the scale of destruction we are seeing now," he said.

Sharif called for swift government intervention to assist affected residents, including their relocation to temporary relief centres.

Both the state and federal governments rushed to express sympathy and pledge assistance. Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim said the federal government was coordinating with Sabah authorities to provide basic assistance and temporary relocation for those affected.

Sabah Chief Minister Datuk Seri Hajiji Noor said the state government had mobilised all relevant agencies to ensure the safety and welfare of those affected. Visiting the scene on Monday however, he announced initial aid of only 2,000 Ringgits (\$US505) for each victim.

As the village head's comments indicate, such disasters are not new. In March 2025, a significant fire destroyed roughly 80 houses, affecting nearly 670 residents, in Kampung Cempaka, Likas, another such village near the Sabah capital of Kota Kinabalu.

Other known blazes include one in Kampung Kurnia Jaya, Tawau, in the south of Sabah state, in 2022 that destroyed over 700 floating homes in a squatter colony, displacing thousands. Two women were killed when they were unable to escape their burning homes.

Nor are the fires confined to Borneo. In Kampung Hakka, near Kuala Lumpur, the Malaysian capital, multiple homes were razed in a 2021 disaster that

mirrored a similar catastrophe there in 2003.

The extreme fire dangers in coastal settlements are well known. Most homes are built entirely of wood, boards and other flammable materials. Houses are tightly packed with minimal space between them, allowing flames to jump from roof to roof in seconds. Narrow wooden walkways and a lack of direct road access prevent standard fire engines from reaching the sources. At low tide, firefighters lose their most immediate water source—the sea—as seen in Sunday’s Kampung Bahagia disaster.

Moreover, the Sabah and Malaysian governments, like governments around the world, are conducting an intensifying crackdown on immigrant residents, including those who live in makeshift villages. In 2025, Malaysian authorities significantly escalated immigration raids. Between January and May, authorities arrested an estimated 34,000 people, according to civil rights organisations.

Previous studies have estimated that some 215,000 people live in about 84 major “Kampung Air” (water villages) across Borneo, with at least 50,000 people in 10,000 settlements in Sabah alone. A significant proportion of the residents are stateless immigrants or refugees, denied citizenship, healthcare, education and land ownership rights. Building on stilts above the water—often considered “no man’s land”—is their only option.

Many residents work in nearby cities—like Sandakan or Kota Kinabalu—as labourers or in the fishing industry, but they cannot afford the high cost of formal land-based housing. Children born in these villages often cannot attend government schools. When their homes are destroyed, their informal community schools can disappear as well.

This year, the Sabah state government announced a new offensive—a digital data gathering exercise to record all so-called illegal immigrants and undocumented persons in the state. While the government said it aims to merely standardise paperwork, it emphasised that all foreign nationals must have legal authorisation to reside in Sabah or face potential deportation.

Recent federal amendments have also reduced the window for stateless individuals to apply for citizenship and narrowed the criteria for children born to stateless parents.

In some areas, governments plan to replace water villages with new townships, hotels and offices to boost tourism. After some previous fires, governments have demolished or failed to rebuild homes, forcing people into

even more precarious living conditions, provoking considerable popular opposition.

For stateless residents, fires can mean losing their only proof of identity—such as IMM13 permits or birth certificates—in the flames. Without these, they face a higher risk of arbitrary detention or deportation, as they cannot prove their right to be in Malaysia.

While saying that humanitarian assistance is a priority, Prime Minister Anwar and state ministers have insisted that the country’s laws regarding illegal structures must be upheld to ensure long-term security.

Anwar’s government has quickly proposed a redevelopment plan for Kampung Bahagia. Deputy Human Resources Minister Datuk Khairul Firdaus Akbar visited the fire-ravaged site yesterday. He said gazetting the 60-acre village would lay the groundwork for “comprehensive development, including the construction of a planned settlement for residents.”

During the Sabah chief minister’s visit to the site on Monday, he said the area was previously recognised as a settlement for Filipino refugees under the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) but that status had been removed. He said a full report on the victims was expected within one to two weeks, noting about 70 percent of them were non-citizens, and those placed in six evacuation centres would remain there for a week pending further assessment.

More broadly, Anwar’s supposed “progressive” Pakatan Harapan coalition government increasingly has been trying to blame migrant and stateless workers—among the most vulnerable members of the working class—for deteriorating economic and social conditions, which Malaysia’s ruling capitalist class is now intensifying amid the global impact of the US-Israeli war on Iran.



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