WWII & Post-War Period

Japanese occupation, liberation, and the transition to Crown Colony status

Japanese Occupation 1941–1945

Japanese forces invaded North Borneo in December 1941. The occupation was brutal — Sandakan held one of the largest prisoner-of-war camps in Southeast Asia, and the infamous Sandakan Death Marches claimed thousands of lives. The indigenous population suffered greatly under Japanese rule. When Allied forces liberated Borneo in 1945, much of the territory's infrastructure lay in ruins.

The Transfer to Crown Colony Status, 1946

Following the war, the Chartered Company ceded North Borneo to the British Crown, and on 15 July 1946, North Borneo became a Crown Colony. This transfer was made without meaningful consultation with the indigenous people of North Borneo. Critics argue that the right of the Sabahan people to self-determination was not considered — a failure that set the stage for subsequent injustices.

The Road to Decolonisation

Following World War II, the United Nations established a framework for the decolonisation of non-self-governing territories. North Borneo was listed as a non-self-governing territory, and Britain had obligations under the UN Charter to develop self-government in the territory. How those obligations were fulfilled — or not — in the context of the formation of Malaysia is central to the RSNB-GIE's legal case.

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