
Malaysia: Self-defense blockades from Sarawak indigenous peoples

Once again the indigenous peoples of Sarawak's rainforests are in the headlines. They have been long suffering and resisting encroachment in their ancestral lands by activities which on behalf of "progress" destroy their livelihoods and culture: logging, mining, oil palm plantations, pulpwood plantations, hydroelectric dams, resorts development (see WRM bulletins 41 and 43).

Despite promises from the government and agreements to previous negotiations needed to enter the area, the biodiversity rich rainforests of the Penan, Kayan and Kenyah indigenous peoples groups in the Malaysian state of Sarawak are being constantly encroached by logging companies like Interhill Logging Sdn. Bhd., Woodman Sdn. Bhd., and Samling Sdn. Bhd. Also Besungai Quarry Sdn. Bhd. is extracting sand from the Baram riverbank near the longhouses of the Kayan and Kenyah communities of Uma Akeh and Sungai Puak.

"Their rights to traditional native lands have been ignored by the logging companies and state government, thus forcing them into lives of difficulty because of deprivation of forest and river resources." "All promises of the Sarawak government concerning biosphere conservation, payment of fair compensation, assistance funds and infrastructure have not been fulfilled," denounces Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM-Friends of the Earth, Malaysia).

That is why the Penan, Kayan and Kenyah have decided to stage road blocks --human barricades and wooden structures put up at strategic points across access roads to prevent the movement of logging and plantation companies' vehicles-- into the disputed logging sites. At least five blockades have been put up and one protest has been staged by several native communities since March 27th, 2002. This is the first time in more than ten years that numerous Sarawak native communities have organized to put up blockades simultaneously in various locations to draw the attention of the Malaysian authorities to their plight.

In a press release, SAM expressed particular concern about the predicament of the Penan communities, who were originally nomadic hunter-gatherers, and resorted to erect the blockades as a desperate measure to draw the authorities' attention to their plight and the continued violation of their rights, as detailed below:

- * Rights to their customary land have long been ignored by the logging companies and the State Government. This has resulted in them having to endure increasingly severe living conditions due to the depletion of forest and river resources and their livelihood.
- * Most of them are living in dire conditions without adequate food supply, proper housing facilities, accessible healthcare and education services and other basic necessities like clean water and electricity.
- * Even the settled Penan communities are also not able to make a living as they have no experience in farming and little assistance in terms of technical training and seed access.

* All the promises by the Sarawak State Government on biosphere reserves, fair compensation process and financial and infrastructure assistance have not been fulfilled.

Before the blockades are dismantled, they would like to see concrete actions taken by both the government authorities and the companies to:

* Fulfil their demands on the recognition of their rights, a fair and transparent compensation process, and meaningful state assistance so that their living conditions can be improved.

* Halt all logging operations and plantation activities on their customary land. They maintain that in the future they should be consulted before any economic activities commence on their native land.

* Recognise that the people have the right to choose development models that best suit them. They assert that development plans must be people-centred and their implementation process must include meaningful participation and prior informed consent from the people.

To support the struggle of Sarawak indigenous peoples, you can send a letter of concern to Malaysian authorities. A sample letter is available at <http://www.wrm.org.uy/alerts/Sarawak240402.html>

Article based on information from: Sahabat Alam Malaysia's Press Statement, April 23, 2002, "The Penan, Kayan and Kenyah protest against logging and sand mining activities on native land", sent by Meenakshi Raman, e-mail: meenaco@pd.jaring.my; The Star, 18.04.02, "32 longhouse folks held over abduction", by Stephen Then, sent by John Kunzli,