
Malaysia: Indigenous Peoples call for a moratorium on large-scale tree plantations

On the World Indigenous Peoples Day – 9th August 2009 – the Malaysian Indigenous Peoples Organisations Coalition called on for Malaysian State governments “to stop large-scale plantations and other extractive activities on our customary lands until effective measures to safeguard our rights and the environment are in place”.

Malaysians Indigenous Peoples Organisations described in a press release (1) how timber companies have exploited their forest, which provides for their means of livelihoods: “Logging have destroyed our fundamental existence to livelihood, the plant varieties including medicinal plants, animals and fish have either become threatened or extinct.”

More hardships are in store for the Indigenous People: “In Sarawak, our communities are yet to face the worse in the near future. As the sun sets on the timber industry in Sarawak, the current state government is energetically seeking to diversify and broaden its revenue base via land development for oil palm plantations and large-scale trees plantations. These land development activities has time and again encroached into the lands and forests of various indigenous communities which claim native customary rights (NCR) over these territories.”

Taking NCR land as “idle land”, the government promotes large-scale commercialisation as a means of bringing “the native communities into mainstream society in order to alleviate their poverty. This argument was used to promote logging in the 1970s and is now used to justify the introduction of oil palm plantations and industrial tree plantations.”

However, such “development” has proved a failure: “the indigenous and local community by and large do not benefit from these activities that destroy the resources on their land”. “After more than three decades of extensive logging and deforestation, why is it that most of our people living in the interior are now worse off than before.” Indigenous Peoples’ organisations question “the reigning ‘development paradigm,’ the idea that these large-scale projects are always beneficial to the indigenous communities.” The reality is that “such projects generate large profits for a small number of people, the elites and the corporations; they also bring social and environmental devastation to the country, and beyond.”

Now, apart from oil palm plantations, the State government of Sarawak has issued licenses for tree plantations over 1,397,644 hectares including NCR land and water catchment areas. “With the water catchment damaged or destroyed, the communities are no longer able to get clean water. The rivers would be polluted with chemicals and silt that washed down from the forest plantation estates” reads the statement.

Plantation companies have already illegally encroached into the customary lands of the indigenous communities without their free, prior and informed consent, resulting in disputes over rights to land and resources that lead to an increasingly tense situation. More than 100 legal demands have been issued by Indigenous communities against the plantation developers, the State Agencies and the

State government in the High Courts all over Sarawak.

Representatives from Indigenous Peoples organisations that form the Malaysian Indigenous Peoples Organisations Coalition “strongly urge a moratorium on any plantation development projects and call the government to immediately bring about meaningful solutions to all these land disputes problems and land rights issues in Sarawak.”

(1) “Malaysian Indigenous Peoples want moratorium on plantations, other extractive projects”, press release of the Malaysian Indigenous Peoples Organisations Coalition, <http://www.indigenouportal.com/Environment/-Malaysian-Indigenous-Peoples-want-moratorium-on-plantations-other-extractive-projects.html>, sent by Bruno Manser Fonds, e-mail: bmf@bmf.ch