Malaysia: River siltation due to deforestation underlying severe floods in Sarawak

Heavy rains started pouring on January 14 and continued for almost one month in the East Malaysian state of Sarawak, hitting especially the central and northern region.

Thousands of evacuees, essential foodstuff airlifted to longhouses, tons of relief aid, closure of primary schools, landslides, crops destroyed have been the toll of an unprecedented devastating flood that has mainly hit rural Sarawak. Paddy fields were ripening when the rain started. Eventually the crops were completely destroyed by the flood. According to a report in The Borneo Post on 11 February 2009, indigenous communities from a number of longhouses in the Baram river region have lost almost their complete harvest.(1)

While changing climate patterns may be conveniently blamed for the devastation (everybody's fault - no one's fault) more than twenty years of forestry policies favouring large-scale depletion of the fragile tropical rainforest ecosystems for short-term (rather short-sighted) profit are a major underlying cause that some are highlighting now.

As the organization Bruno Manser Fonds recalls "Despite warnings from environmentalists and international scientists, less than ten percent of Sarawak's primary forests have been spared from logging without due importance being attached to the long-term environmental, social and economic consequences of logging."

A lawyer from Kuching, one of the provinces hit by the floods, wrote in his blog (http://voonleeshan.blogspot.com/2009/01/2009-floods-in-kuching.html) that many of the causes of floods in Kuching and other adjacent areas had been created through policies of the government of the day. And he asks them: "Why fell the trees and cleared the forests, when trees could help mitigate floods by soaking the water during heavy rain? Why fell trees and clearing of forests be allowed for purpose of profit of the few, yet, without proper replanting and forest management? Were not these contributed to erosions and siltation of the river beds of the Sarawak River? Had not this siltation then caused the riverbeds to be shallow? Had not the shallow waterbeds cause rain water to rise up very quickly to flood riverbanks and into the farms, shops and houses?"

Siltation linked to deforestation has also resulted in massive death of fish. In this respect, the Digest on Malaysian News reported that "hundreds of fish surfaced in the Batang Rajang [river] as they struggled for air, some already dead. There also have been several reports of such incidents in Belaga and Kapit since late last year which was cause for much worry for the people there. Natural Resources and Environment Board (NREB) had found that the fish had practically suffocated to death and not poisoned. The cause of the incident is very simple. Rajang River became too shallow due to heavy siltation. Siltation was caused by heavy and uncontrolled deforestation in upriver areas."

According to the same source, "We all know that the erosion is due to uncontrolled logging in upper Batang Rajang. The culprits (who happen to be associate of Taib Mahmud, the Chief Minister of

Sarawak) are the timber companies. They rape the virgin jungle of Sarawak which resulted in massive deforestation and erosion and siltation which eventually make the Batang Rajang proned to flooding (which severely affected Sibu town) and hindering water nagivation due to shallow river. And now, the fishes are dying."

The huge profits from logging have gone to a handful of corporations and to the pockets of few and powerful people, but its devastating effects are now being suffered by thousands of people, many of whom have actively opposed logging in their territories.

(1) "Rural Sarawak suffers flood consequences", media release of Bruno Manser Fonds, 17 February 2009, www.bmf.ch,info@bmf.ch

(2) "Siltation killed fish at Batang Rajang", Digest on Malaysian News (http://malaysiadigest.blogspot.com/2009/02/siltation-killed-fish-at-batang-rajang.html)

Other sources: several news features from the Malaysian website The Star Online, http://thestar.com.my