
Malaysia: The long struggle of the Penan of Sarawak to protect their forest

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In the mid 1980s, the plight of the indigenous peoples of Sarawak got visibility when they staged peaceful protests against depletion of their home --the forest-- to logging activities or agroindustrial plantations for the benefit of commercial groups.

Among the groups that inhabit the Sarawak forest, the Penan are the last nomadic hunter-gatherers of Borneo. Their population is close to 10,000 with more than 5,000 of them concentrated in Baram (Miri Division), followed by some 1,500 in Belaga (Kapit Division), around 1,000 and 700 in Mulu and Bintulu respectively and 200 in Limbang. About 21% of them today are permanently settled while another 75% are considered to be semi-settled, leaving their permanent homes for the forest from time to time. The rest, around 5%, are still nomadic.

They have suffered untold hardship when game, fish, fruit trees and wild sago palms, which is their staple food, started to disappear. Ngot Laing, 53, Chief of Long Lilim, Patah River recalls: "In the past our life was peaceful, it was so easy to obtain food. You could even catch the fish using your bare hands --we only needed to look below the pebbles and rocks or in some hiding holes in the river."

Many years after promises were made to them by the government, their lives have not changed for the better. They are hungrier, sicker and poorer than ever. Urin Ajang, 23, from Long Sayan, Apoh River says: "In the past, we did not fall sick, we did not have scabies, the water was clean. We did not have all these puddles that breed mosquitoes." Ngot also says: "The people are frequently sick. They are hungry. They develop all sorts of stomach pains. They suffer from headaches. Children will cry when they are hungry. Several people including children also suffer from skin diseases, caused by the polluted river. Upper Patah used to be so clean. Now the water is like Milo, sometimes you can even find oil spills floating downstream."

Even for the settled communities, food supply isn't safely steady since agriculture is a new invention that they have been trying to master without adequate technical and resource assistance. Farming productivity is low, seed access is limited and attempts to grow crops like vegetables often simply fail. Lep Selai, nomadic, from Limbang River, says: "Living a settled life is just not our way. We are used to the forest. Besides, I do not know how to farm."

Failure is rooted in the top-down scheme of projects. The importance of community participation in the decision-making process is neglected, so their main demand, which is to halt all logging operations on their land, is not taken into account. Johnny Lalang, 37, from Long Lunyim, Pelutan River, says: "The taukeh (boss) talks to us like we are kids. He talks down to us like we are stupid. He would ask us: 'why are you asking these things from me? Go and ask from the government for these things. I don't come here to satisfy your needs.' They have totally no respect for us at all. Try to feel what we have felt, for 16 years."

The Penan are urged to settle down as a sign of progress. But they know the vested interests behind that. Peng Megut, nomadic, from the Magoh River, says: "We know that if we agree to settle down, it

would in effect be a trade-off for our forest. The government is asking us to settle down, as if once when we are settled, they can do anything to our forest.”

They, the guardians of the forests, are being deprived of their land. Ayan Jelawing, 64, from Long Beluk, says: “We were the first people of this Apoh area. The waters did not have a name then, not until we gave it a name in our language. We first settled down and attempted to farm after the government asked us to do so. We moved to Sungai Jemalin in the 1950s. This is where Malaysia first entered into our area and where I made my Identity Card. The logging companies first entered into the Apoh area in the 1980s. When the Penan communities went to meet the companies’ managers they would simply say that the Penan do not have any rights to this area. How could this be?” Ajang Kiew, 50, from Long Sayan, says: “We asked for forest reserves. We asked for school for the village. We asked for clinics. Instead they gave us the logging companies. Now it is oil palm plantations. We would end up as labourers for hire. The profits would only make other people rich. But the land they work on is land belonging to the Penan.”

After years of waiting, the communities have struck back taking on the logging roads again at four separate locations, blocking them with wooden structures and human barricades, demanding the powerful timber companies to stop plundering their land.

Nyagung Malin, nomadic, from Puak River, demands: “We are used to living in the forest. And life did not use to be difficult. If we needed to build our huts, we could easily find the leaves in the forest. If you really want to give us development, then do not disturb our forest.”

Article based on information from: “Baram’s Penan community -hungry, poor and sick”; series of interviews with representatives from nine Penan communities in Baram, Miri Division, that appeared in the Utusan Konsumer May 2002 edition, sent by Shamila Ariffin, e-mail: shamila73@yahoo.com