
Malaysia: Blockade against logging in Sarawak forests

The struggle of the Penan and other indigenous peoples of Sarawak to defend their ancestral lands and culture, is a very long and hard one. A way through which the Penan have expressed their resistance is the construction of blockades to prevent logging companies entering the forest. Even though to the viewpoint of the authorities this kind of actions constitute the so called "Penan problem", as a matter of fact the real problem is the official attitude, deaf to the claims of the Penan and friendly towards Malaysian and foreign logging companies that invade their lands and destroy the forest.

Last January another round of anti-logging protests was launched by two Penans' longhouses in the Upper Baram region. They are opposing the activities of a timber company trespassing their territory. A group of about 120 people --comprising men, women and children-- erected a blockade across a timber track leading to the longhouses at Long Sayan and Long Belok in Sungai Tutoh.

Penan chief Ajang Kiew Ajang expressed in an interview in Marudi that the road was barred to prevent the timber workers from entering a disputed forest region. More than 30 bulldozers and tractors and other heavy machinery have been sent to the area. "We depend on these forests for our survival as we have no land of our own. We have no choice but to stop them by force" he said. Ajang added that the company failed to honour an agreement signed in October 1997, according to which a previously-held negotiation was needed for the company to enter the area. He also denounced that their appeals to the Government to help them and give them legal protection, and recognise their native customary rights over their ancestral land, were completely ignored.

Even though no physical violence has occurred until now it is feared that, as has happened many times before, the Penan may become victims of repression by the State police, which acts in collusion with the company.

Article based on information from: "Penans protest against logging in Upper Baram" by Stephen Then, The Star, 12/1/2001.