
Malaysia: Penans' blockade against logging in Sarawak

For years indigenous peoples of Sarawak have been fighting to defend their land and forests against "development" plans involving logging, oil palm plantations, pulpwood plantations, hydroelectric dams, mining activities and resorts development. These activities, which count on the support of the national and local authorities, are not only destroying their livelihoods but also --as in the case of the nomadic Penans-- are putting at risk their existence as a culture. Nowadays there are only about 10,000 Penans left in Sarawak's interior region. As well as other Dayak people, they have been and still are victims of all kind of abuses --including physical violence-- to the hands of the police force and intimidations by thugs deployed by timber companies.

On August 11th this year, more than a hundred Penans, comprising men and women from various settlements in the interior area of Sungai Apoh/Tutoh in the Baram region, gathered at Long Kevok to stage a non-violent protest against logging activities in their communal lands and forests. They erected a wooden barricade on a logging road used by Lajung Lumber (a subsidiary company of Rimbunan Hijau Sdn.Bhd.), Shin Yang, and Rawood to stop the companies' timber extraction and transport operations in their traditional territories. They resorted to this action because, in spite of their numerous complaints, the companies and the higher authorities have been ignoring their rights over the territory and its resources. The Penans denounced that Rimbunan Hijau and Shin Yang invaded their territory, bulldozing their planted fruit trees and grave-yards. The companies also encroached into their Communal Forest Reserves and carried out logging activities there, without any previous consultation with the legitimate owners.

Personnel from the Marudi Police Station and Long Lama Police Station were sent to the blockade site on August 13th. Even though no arrests took place, it was feared that violence against peaceful demonstrators might occur, as has happened in previous occasions. The blockade was lifted in the latter part of August as the Penans had to go back to their respective villages/settlements to complete their farming season (planting of rice). The blockades may be resumed if no solutions are achieved between the two parties. Nevertheless, petitions and support are still very much needed to persuade and influence the State government leaders to address the pressing issue faced by the Penans' rights to land and forest resources.

If you wish to express your support to the Penans struggle, please visit:
http://www.wrm.org.uy/english/tropical_forests/alerts4.html#Penan

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