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## Malaysia: conflict caused by Bakun dam continues in Sarawak

The Bakun Hydroelectric Dam Project has aroused widespread concern among environmental and social NGOs and indigenous peoples' organizations in Sarawak, which have been opposing this megaproject considered unnecessary -since the present and future energy demand of the country are adequately covered with the electricity produced nowadays- and negative from an environmental and social point of view because one third of Sarawak's remaining primary forest lie in the area to be affected by the dam, thus forcing the migration of indigenous peoples from the catchment area. In May 1997 the Coalition of Concerned NGOs on Bakun (Gabungan) urged ABB, the main contractor involved in the project, to definitively abandon the project (see WRM Bulletin 2). In February 1998 the Bakun Region People's Committee (BRPC) urges the State government and the Bakun Resettlement Committee (BRC) to shelve the resettlement of the Bakun residents which is tentatively set for July that year (see WRM Bulletin 9).

In spite of these severe objections and the reduction of the scale of the originally planned dam, the project's implementation went on and the denounced problems persist. On June 10th Gabungan delivered the following press statement on this conflictive issue:

"On Reviving the Bakun Project

The announcement by the Prime Minister (June 8) that the Bakun dam will be scaled down to around 500 MW capacity, raises some vital questions:

### **1. With a downsized dam, why does the Sarawak government still want to resettle 10,000 indigenous peoples?**

Initially, the Bakun dam was supposed to have a capacity of 2,400 MW and the size of the flooded area required the displacement of 10,000 indigenous peoples in 15 long houses. Now that the dam has been downsized, why should the same number of people be displaced? One would have thought that, if the Sarawak Government had followed the recommendations of its consultants in the Bakun Hydroelectric Project, the resettlement would have been put off as long as possible until just before the reservoir is flooded. Furthermore, now that the dam has been scaled down, that there is no longer a need to displace that many people.

What has been happening, from the study by the Fact Finding Mission sent by the Coalition of Concerned NGOs, is that the Sarawak authorities are rushing the resettlement. They want "Operation Exodus" to be completed by August 1999. Apart from the reason above, the Asap Resettlement Scheme is a gigantic failure in planning, the most serious problems being:

- There are no employment opportunities in Asap. The one oil palm company has just planted their seedlings, so the people will have to wait five years before the trees mature for harvesting. This is assuming plantation wage labour is suitable for the Bakun indigenous people, who have thrived on swidden farming, forest products in their traditional long house communities for centuries. The land they have been given (3 acres) is not what they had been promised (3 hectares) and certainly not

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enough to work on by each household, never mind their future generations.

- The house units at the Asap Resettlement Scheme -small, cheap wood, shoddy work and priced at RM52,000- would be considered daylight robbery by West Malaysians. Despite the fact that this is the biggest resettlement scheme of indigenous peoples, the scandal is that it has still not been given a Certificate of Fitness by the Kapit Majlis. The reason given is that there are defects in the design of the houses and facilities around the long houses there.

The full report of the Fact Finding Mission to Bakun will be released by the end of June 1999 and submitted to the federal and state governments.

## **2. Dams cannot be considered renewable**

Hydroelectric dams, together with nuclear and coal-fired power stations cannot be considered "renewable". The world-wide experience with hydroelectric dams have shown that they are environmentally destructive and have a fixed life, after which they need to be decommissioned at great cost. That is why the World Bank does not finance hydroelectric dams anymore. Our hydroelectric dams in the Cameron Highlands are a poor advertisement. The Chenderoh Dam has had to be upgraded and new machines installed.

## **3. Alternatives to the Bakun Dam**

Like the response to our water crisis, we have yet to see the Government implement energy saving measures and ensuring our power stations operate at full efficiency. Other countries which have done this have managed to reduce the consumption of fuel oils and the cost of generation almost a decade after the mid-seventies by energy saving alone! Our own Energy Minister has said that the industrial sector can save up to RM685 million in energy cost a year if it implements energy-saving measures.

We have pointed out that the country has to have an energy-needs inventory, not just electricity consumption projections. This means the collection of reliable data on types of energy produceable and the varying amounts used in the country, both domestic and industrial; optimising the match between energy sources and uses to avoid wastage, and tapping more renewable sources.

The country has not been given a total picture of our options. For example, we have been told that the Bakun project will be saving on consumption of our own gas supply, but the public has not been informed that we have been wantonly selling gas to Japan and other countries anyway all these years!

If we need hydroelectric dams at all, these should be very small dams built in situ to supply power to long houses and local industries without the need to displace any indigenous peoples.

## **4. Why do we want toxic and energy-hungry industries such as aluminium smelters?**

The earliest justification for the Bakun dam during the Eighties was the need for energy to fuel an aluminium smelter in Bintulu. Aluminium smelting is one industry that the developed countries want to dump on gullible people like us because it is environmentally toxic and consumes voracious amounts of energy. It is unbelievable that after all these years, when we are supposed to be more environmentally conscious and wary of foreign countries dumping their toxic industries on South countries, the aluminium smelter is again proposed! Who will gain from this investment?

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## 5. The right of information.

The Government must be transparent about the cost of the project, the tenders for the contracts, etc. Furthermore, the public has the right to know why Ekran Berhad and Bakun Hydroelectric Corporation will receive a scandalous RM 950 million for compensation. So far we have not been able to gauge such specific information. The Bakun dam project has been wrapped in controversy from the beginning because of secrecy over these details. We hope that this will change for the Malaysian people are entitled to information which affect their lives and taxes.

Released by:

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On behalf of Coalition of Concerned NGOs on Bakun"

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