
Sarawak: indigenous peoples defend their rights

On January 12th the Penans of Long Sayan and Long Belok set up blockades at strategic road points to prevent Lajung Lumber S.Bhd from conducting logging activities in their communal forest, after the company refused to meet their demands.

In October 1997 Lajung Lumber had signed an agreement with the Penans to log pre-established areas of their communal forest. However the company violated the terms and conditions stipulated in the agreement trying to log undesignated areas even without paying compensation. This abuse provoked the reaction of the indigenous communities.

As a consequence of their direct action, on January 26th the Police instructed the Penans to present themselves at Marudi to meet with the General Manager of the company. The case was presented to the District officer who ruled in favour of the Penans and instructed Lajung Lumber to pay them a compensation for the volume of timber harvested since January 1998. In addition all vehicles and logging tractors belonging to the company were to be removed from areas of the communal forest not designated for logging in the agreement. Furthermore he requested the company to supply the Penans with sufficient material to erect a new longhouse in Long Sayan.

Another important action was that of several Iban families in Selangau, Mukau District. On February 2nd they launched their protest against the company Ladang Hijau (Sarawak) Sdn.Bhd. for trespassing into their lands to develop an oil palm plantation.

Their protest consisted of asking the company workers to stop their activity at the disputed area, putting a blockade to stop the company from carrying out further operations, and hanging banners addressed to call the public's attention. Prior to the ongoing protest, the affected Ibans had sent a Memorandum/Petition to the Chief Minister of Sarawak, the State Minister of Land Development, and their State Assemblyman (for Tamin), where they clearly stated their viewpoints and concerns on various aspects of the plantation scheme on their traditional territories. Unfortunately, their petition seemed to have fallen on deaf ears. After having exhausted all the available ways to bring their problems to the state government leaders and relevant authorities and still no action was forthcoming, the affected Ibans felt there was no other recourse but to put up the physical protest/direct action to put an immediate stop to the trespass and destruction to their home and livelihoods. They have also decided to institute legal action in court in the hope of obtaining a court order to stop the company from further operations.

Oil palm monocultures are expanding all over South East Asia –mainly in Indonesia and Malaysia- at the expense of indigenous peoples' lands and causing severe environmental damage.

Source: Sahabat Alam Malaysia.

