
Sarawak: Bakun Dam

On May 29 Sahabat Alam Malaysia - Penang sent an appeal to the government to reconsider the Bakun Hydroelectric Dam Project. SAM claims for a thorough and detailed reappraisal of the project, in the light of the economic, environmental and socio-cultural concerns it has raised. In effect, the present and future energy demand of the country are adequately covered with the electricity produced nowadays. An increase in energy production would mean the promotion of high energy consumption. Besides, one third of Sarawak's remaining primary forest lie in the area to be affected by the dam, so it is expected that some 69000 hectares of the flooded area will be logged, forcing the migration of indigenous peoples from the catchment area. With them 60 rice varieties will also be lost. Perspectives for flora and fauna are also threatening: fish stocks will be damaged following the loss of mobility and deoxygenation of river water due to the flooding; 43 protected species of fauna and 67 protected species of flora could disappear because of flooding. Clearcutting could have catastrophic effects on the dam itself, increasing the chance of sediment build up, flood and slope failure. The infrastructure needed for the construction works -which includes an airport- will facilitate the encroachment on Native Customary Rights lands.

SAM's appeal to the government urges to: consider a thorough review of the project, establish effective consultation with the affected communities, make public the whole of the information on decisions regarding the project, compensate the residents fairly and equitably for the losses they will suffer, respect the rights of affected people to choose their home and maintain their lifestyle and culture. The Coalition of Concerned NGOs on Bakun (Gabungan) elaborated a Memorandum that was presented to ABB, the main contractor involved in the project, during a meeting held in May 23. Gabungan made clear that its main demand is that ABB definitively abandons the project, considered to be "economically misconceived, financially risky, socially disruptive and environmentally disastrous". However, taking into account that the diversion tunnels are near to completion and the construction of the dam proper is about to begin, the Coalition has put several questions to ABB concerning technical, financial and environmental aspects of the project. They still remain unanswered.

Source: SAM - Penang. May 1997.