
Malaysia: Penan demand against government for forestry licenses

The Penan have been living in the rainforests of Sarawak since time immemorial. They used to hunt and gather food from the rainforest and they lived on sago, a starch extracted from the pith of sago palm stems, until the 1950s, when they decided to settle at village locations where they live today. (1)

In the 1980s, large-scale industrial logging started operating in Sarawak. Logging operators have trespassed onto the Penan's ancestral land and many Penan who have struggled for land rights against loggers have suffered intimidation and violence at the hands of security forces hired by logging firms and Malaysian police. Even a Penan chief was murdered in 2008, allegedly for his opposition to logging. Also mono-crop plantations and other alleged "development" projects followed suit disrespecting Penan's land rights.

Intrusion has not ceased. Forestry operations by the three Malaysian timber conglomerates of Samling, Interhill and Timberplus in concessions issued to Damai Cove Resorts, Samling Plywood, Samling Reforestation and Timberplus have affected Penan villages located in the rainforest of Sarawak's Middle Baram region particularly the communities of Ba Abang, Long Pakan, Long Item, Long Lilim and Long Kawi. For over ten years, various logging operators have trespassed onto their ancestral land with bulldozers, excavators, shovels, trucks and lorries, destroying a substantial area of the Penan's forest, fruit trees, crops and cultural heritage, such as graves and historical sites.

The communities are demanding land titles for an area of 80,000 hectares, cancellation of the four logging and tree plantation licenses unlawfully issued on their lands as well as compensation for damages done by timber companies in the course of their past operations. The Penan have asked the court for an injunction "against the licensees, plus their contractors and subcontractors, for the removal of all structures, equipment and machinery from the plaintiffs' native customary rights land". They consider Sarawak government's issue of timber and tree planting licenses to be "oppressive, arbitrary, illegal and unconstitutional".

Outside logging company workers - mostly male workers - who came to live nearby the indigenous communities have also tragically disrupted the Penan's community life. In September 2009, a Malaysian government report confirmed allegations by the Penan of the middle Baram region that a number of indigenous girls and women had been sexually abused and raped by logging company employees.

Destruction, disruption, violence. Penan's voices reveal what this kind of "development" has brought to them: "Interhill shows no respect whatsoever for us as people who are living from the forest" "Since Interhill advanced into our area in 1988, we have seen nothing but destruction and no positive development whatsoever." "Interhill is polluting our drinking water catchments with motor oil and old truck batteries. They simply dump their trash into our river." (2)

(1) "Penan to sue Sarawak gov't over logging, plantations", December 10th, 2009, <http://www.borneoproject.org/article.php?id=790>

(2) Tong Tana, March 2009, "No luxury hotel at the expense of the rainforest", Bruno Manser

