
Malaysia, Sarawak: Native customary landowners continue to protest against large scale oil palm plantation schemes

The State Government of Sarawak has issued a provisional lease for an oil palm plantation scheme to Woodijaya Sdn Bhd, a subsidiary of Rimbunan Hijau Sdn Bhd on Lot 197 Teraja LD and Lot 1200 Puyut LD, both which are 4,658 hectares. The 60 year lease that was issued by the State's Lands & Surveys Department encroaches on lands belonging to the Malays of Marudi and Ibans of Lubuk Amam.

The leaders of both these communities informed SAM (Friends of the Earth Malaysia) that the company entered their customary lands without their prior knowledge or consent in 2010. Since 2010, the communities have undergone constant pressure from having outsiders on their lands and have had to endure the impacts of the large scale monoculture plantation including degradation in the soil and water pollution. The communities depend on the river for supply of potable water and other daily activities. This scheme has also caused a decrease in their livelihood as they depend on the forests and the river for resources for their sustenance.

Ever since the encroachment, the communities have been protesting against this scheme. In May 2010, they set up an Action Committee led by Othman Jais, Wasli Othman and Abang Lee @ Suhaili Lie. They brought their repeated complaints and protests to the District Office in Marudi but to no avail. They also wrote to the then Chief Minister of Sarawak Abdul Taib Mahmud, who was also the state's Minister of Resource Planning and Environment to cancel the lease issued to the company and recognise their native customary rights and customary territories. The committee also arranged for a number of dialogues with the local authorities and representatives of the company. Nothing came out of this too.

On 08 May 2012, after unsuccessfully trying to get the companies out of their customary lands, they filed a civil suit in the High Court of Sabah & Sarawak in Miri against Woodijaya. As a result of the civil suit, Woodijaya has currently removed all its machineries from the customary lands belonging to them and have not trespassed into their area until now. The case is still pending in court.

There are many other similar cases like this pending in court as a result of communities' resistance against large scale plantation schemes.

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