
Malaysia: Good news from Iban community but no news about Bruno Manser's disappearance in Sarawak

Bruno Manser, a Swiss human rights activist devoted to the defence of the Penan indigenous people of the rainforests of Sarawak, disappeared in May 2000 (see WRM Bulletin 40). Bruno became a friend of the Penan and supported their struggle against logging companies, which, in collusion with the government, have been and still are destroying their forests. A year has already gone by without news about Bruno's fate. This uncertain situation has provoked concern and pain among the Penan people (see WRM Bulletin 41) and the international environmental community.

From May to October 2000 different groups of Penan searched for him, and later on, in November, the authorities and the media were informed of his disappearance. In December an expedition flew in helicopter to Batu Lawi, a prominent mountain in the region, that Bruno had had the intention to climb, according to what he said a few days before his disappearance. But every attempt to find him has until now been fruitless.

In the meantime, as the unbridled expansion of the logging companies continues, the situation of the nomadic Penan of the Limbang, Magoh, Batu, Ureu, Nyakit, Adang and Kubaan rivers gets worse. Since the territory where they can hunt and fish is increasingly occupied by loggers, their resources are dwindling, which puts at risk their traditional economy and their own culture.

Several activities have been planned in Sarawak and in Switzerland one year after Bruno Manser's disappearance. Both the Penan and Bruno Manser Fonds have declared that they will not give up the search. The struggle for the Penan's territorial and cultural rights will not stop either.

Within the uncertain situation regarding Bruno, it is encouraging to learn that the struggle continues in Sarawak and that a local community has recently won a crucial legal battle. The Borneo Resources Institute informs that the High Court in Kuching, (the capital city of the State of Sarawak) ruled in favour of one Iban community (Rumah Nor Sg. Sekabai, Sebauh), in a civil suit which they filed against the Sarawak Government and two companies: Borneo Pulp & Paper Sdn. Bhd. & Borneo Pulp Plantations Sdn. Bhd.

The Iban claimed in their suit that the land in dispute is their native customary rights land because it is within the communal native customary land boundary of their village/longhouse and since the time of their ancestors, they had used, occupied or collected forest produce from or hunted within the said land or fished the rivers therein.

Borneo Pulp Plantations Sdn. Bhd. (the subsidiary of Borneo Pulp & Paper Sdn. Bhd.) had been granted several provisional leases by the Sarawak Government in 1997 over about 300,000 hectares of land to establish an acacia tree plantation to supply pulpwood for a pulp and paper mill to be set up by the parent company near Tatau in Bintulu. Most if not all these lands are claimed by the local native communities as their customary lands, but the Sarawak Government alleged it is all State Land.

The Kuching High Court's ruling is an important victory for the Iban and at the same time sets a very useful precedent for two similar suits that have been filed in the Sibu High Court by more than twenty Iban communities whose claims are based on the same grounds and against the same defendants.

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