
Malaysia: Resistance against logging and oil palm in Sarawak

For years, the Dayak indigenous peoples of Sarawak have been defending their forests and livelihoods from the depredatory activities of logging, oil palm and eucalyptus plantations promoted by the Malaysian and the Sarawak state governments. In an unequal struggle, local communities -supported by Malaysian and international social and environmental NGOs- have been resisting the destruction of their forests and the installation of plantations. The issue of land tenure and the recognition of their Native Customary Rights is in the background of this dispute, and local villagers have frequently suffered pressure and brutality from the government's forces while defending their rights.

Last April, people belonging to the Dayak Iban longhouses of Rumah Ketip, Rh Lanyau, Rh. Mulok, Rh. Anchih, Rh. Lipo and Rh. Madak carried out a direct action of protest against logging operations within their native customary rights land in upper Balingian area of Mukah District in Sibu Division, Sarawak, by putting up a human blockade to stop the timber company "Always Yield" from carrying out logging in their lands. The action had been preceded by several requests to government authorities and the police to stop the trespassers' activities, which proved useless.

Additionally, the longhouses of the area are resisting the establishment of oil palm plantations within their native customary rights land by the company Novelpac. Malaysia is the world's largest palm oil producer and the invasion of oil palm plantations has a long history of negative social and environmental impacts, starting with the appropriation of local peoples' lands. Although plantations appear to constitute a more positive activity when compared with logging, they are in fact worse, because land appropriation becomes permanent. As a local person said: "Logging companies destroy our forest and leave. Plantation companies destroy our forest and stay!"

In the disputes between oil palm companies and local peoples, the government takes sides with the former, thereby forcing communities to resort to different forms of resistance. Many of such actions later result in court proceedings. One of such cases is that of a group of 30 Iban from several villages in the Bakong area in Baram, who will have to appear in Court on May 22nd. In 1997 they blockaded the oil palm plantation company Empresa and its contractor Segarakam from trespassing their customary lands, on which the company intended to destroy their crops and set up an oil palm plantation. After failing to get any response or assistance from the authorities, the Ibans had no choice but to exercise their right of private defence to protect their lands and crops thereon by detaining three bulldozers of the company.

The Company lodged a complaint with the police accusing the Ibans of gang robbery of the bulldozers. On 19th December, 1997, the police went to the Iban village wanting to arrest the village chief for the said offence and to retrieve the bulldozers. The Ibans resisted the arrest on the ground that it was the company which trespassed on their customary lands and which destroyed their crops. In the scuffle, the police fired several shots at the Ibans. Three of them were shot and one who was shot with a pistol on the head died on the spot.

Not content with having the police on their side, the companies hire thugs to intimidate local peoples.

This policy has resulted in increased violence and further court proceedings. Now 19 Ibans from Ulu Niah are being charged with the murder of four Chinese gangsters whom a plantation company paid to intimidate and harass the Ibans for opposing its oil palm plantation activities in their traditional lands and will have to appear in court on May 19th.

For a comprehensive view of the conflict going on in Sarawak and the long campaign of support to the Dayak .

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