
Malaysia: who is defending the country's sovereignty in Sarawak?

Massive logging and the development of large scale tree monocultures for the production of fiber and palm oil, together with dams and tourism megaprojects are the main activities that threaten the environment and the rights over resources of indigenous peoples in Sarawak, in the northwest region of Borneo Island in Malaysia. Nearly half of its population is composed by different ethnic groups, known as Dayaks, who live on agriculture, fishing, hunting and gathering. Local communities, with the support of national and international environmental organizations, have been opposing for years this destructive type of development promoted by the private sector and supported by the Sarawak State government and the Malaysian central government. Despite all efforts, depredation continues.

According to estimations, 70% of Sarawak's forests -one of the world's oldest tropical forests in the world- has been denuded, at a rate nearly twice that of the Amazon. The region was the source for most of the tropical wood Malaysia exported since the decade of 1970. Only the most remote areas of Sarawak haven't been affected by logging. By 1991, even the pro-logging ITTO warned that Sarawak would be denuded within 13 years if the 150 timber companies operating in the region -under concessions granted by the government, most of them within the natives' customary lands- did not cut down production drastically.

These forests are not empty and deforestation impacts heavily on the lives and livelihoods of forest and forest dependent peoples. The Penans -one of the Dayak ethnic groups- are probably the worst hit by this type of "development". They are a forest people and most of them have been forced to leave their land and to move into temporary government settlements, where they live in a humble situation and are heartsick for home. Only some 63 families remain in the forest, living on hunting and gathering. Since they are nomadic and don't clear land for annual harvest, the law considers the land they occupy as State forests and does not recognise them ownership rights to their benefits. For years the Malaysian government has promised to create a 1,280-square-mile forest reserve for the Penans in what they regard as their ancestral land, but the promise has not been honoured yet and there are no signs that it will be. On the contrary, logging companies and the government are one and the same, not only in their viewpoint on development (where Penans are considered backwards and an obstacle to modernity and progress), but also in the fact that important government officials are ex-industry representatives.

Within such context, the struggle of the natives of Sarawak has received strong support from environmentalists and concerned individuals from all over the world and this has been used by the Malaysian government to try to portray itself as defending the country's sovereignty against "Western" interference in its internal affairs. However, the situation is quite the contrary. What the Sarawak and Malaysian governments are in fact doing is imposing the Western development model on the peoples of Sarawak, resulting in devastating social and environmental impacts. On the other side, the natives of Sarawak are trying to protect their forests and livelihoods against such Western model. Who is then defending sovereignty?

Sources: "Nomadic Rain-Forest Dwellers in Malaysia Fear Extinction" by Ecological Enterprises, 16/8/99, based on "Nomadic rain-forest tribe in Borneo fears extinction" published by Associated

