
Malaysia: resistance to plantations in Sarawak

Plans for setting up an industrial acacia tree plantation in the native customary right (NCR) land of Dayak Ibans people at the Balingian area is being strongly resisted. The plantation will affect the customary land of 23 longhouses. The problem started in 1997, when the State government granted Borneo Pulp Plantation (BPP) provisional leases over two lots in that area -comprising about 300,000 hectares- without the knowledge and the informed consent of the affected people. Soon afterwards, in February that year, Borneo Pulp & Paper -a parent company of the former- illegally encroached onto the Ibans' NCR land at upper Sungai Bawang and Sungai Kemena, clearing their cultivated lands, old settlements and forest gardens. In July the 23 longhouse community organized itself to face the aggression, but the authorities ignored their complaints and no action was taken against the company.

Considering that the State and national authorities, as well as the companies themselves, turned a deaf ear to the people's claims, the affected Iban community decided to file two legal suits against them, questioning both provisional leases by considering them illegal. Since then the opposition to BPP operations in the region is mounting, and other affected indigenous communities have decided to institute legal actions that are now being considered by different High Courts in Sarawak.

Similar problems and resistance are occurring with oil palm plantations. The Malaysian government is willing to invest heavily in the palm oil sector to face the competition of Indonesia. Sarawak will open up some 50,000 hectares of land every year during the next few years to be converted into such monocultures. Local communities strongly resist the installation of oil palm plantations in their lands, since they mean the destruction of the forest and the loss of their livelihood. In April 1999 local villagers of the Kanowit area filed a suit against Kanowit Oil Palm Plantations and against the State Government of Sarawak for converting their NCR land into plantations. The project involves a total of 30,000 hectares, 8,000 of which have already been planted and are to be harvested next year. As in the previous case, local people resorted to legal actions after previous unheard claims to the authorities.

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