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Villagers protest tree-planting project

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A group of Bidayuh villagers staged a peaceful protest against a tree planting project on their native customary rights (NCR) land in Gunung Apeng, Serian, about 60 km from Kuching.

The project, financed by a Japanese company, is supported by the Sarawak state government.

As Saturday's tree-planting commenced, 65 villagers armed with banners and posters aired their grouses. They also handed a strongly-worded memorandum to Sabah-based Japanese Consul General Koichi Morita, who was also present.

The project, covering a total of 300 hectares in Balai Ringin and Apeng, involves the planting over a period of 10 years from 2007 of local hard-wood species such as kapur bukat and engkabang jantang which the Japanese say is part of their contribution in dealing with global warming by putting the forest cover back.

The idea was initiated by the Japan-Malaysia Association and sponsored by Kinoshita Group, one of Japan's biggest housing construction companies. It is supported by the Sarawak Forestry Department.

The Bidayuh landowners from three nearby villagers - Mongkos, Mentu Tapu and Paon Gahad - carried a huge banner which read: 'We are the land-owners. Get our permission to plant trees/consult us'.

Another banner read: 'Plant trees in Japan. Respect indigenous land rights in Sarawak'.

Japan is one of the biggest buyers of Sarawak logs and timber products used mainly in its housing construction sector.

Mulling legal action

Sarawak Dayak Iban Association (Sadia) secretary-general Nicholas Munjah handed the memorandum on behalf of the protestors to Morita.

The memorandum stated that local indigenous communities are concerned with the Japanese tree-planting activity that encroaches on their NCR land.

"Your activity is in violation of our rights and our freedom of livelihood," they said.

"During the Japanese Occupation of Sarawak our grandfathers gazetted the Apeng Forest Reserve for their descendants and future generations

"The indigenous people have been practising good forest management since time immemorial and are the best conservators of their own forests," they added.

Munjah told Malaysiakini that they intend to take the matter to court if the tree-planting activity on the NCR land is not stopped.

Meanwhile, the Japanese Consul, when contacted, said he was surprised by the protest. "I had no idea it was going to happen."

Morita said he was invited to the ceremony as a guest and that to the best of his knowledge it was not a Japanese government project.

"Obviously these are problems that Sarawakians themselves need to resolve," he said, referring to the NCR land claimants and the state authorities.