

Stop the encroachment & Gazette our villages & Forest Reserves

We would like to make some clarifications on the five blockades which have been set up by Penan communities in Baram since last week to avoid any misunderstanding on the part of other parties. The villages which are involved in this blockade are Long Sayan and Long Belok in Sungai Apoh, Long Lutin in Sungai Patah, Long Kevok in Sungai Layun, Tutoh and the nomadic group Ba' Bevan in Sungai Si'ang, Tutoh.

Here we would like to explain why those blockades were set up.

Firstly, the reason the Penan villages are forced to voice their protest in this way is because the issuance of logging licences in Sarawak is done in a non-transparent way and has neglected to consider customary rights of indigenous peoples in the state, including those of the Penan communities', resulting in the logging encroachments into our territories.

Secondly, numerous Penan villagers have been writing to the authorities for years to appeal for the encroachment issues to be resolved and for assistance to improve our standard of living to be delivered. However until today, most of our requests have not been fulfilled despite several meetings with the authorities and SUHAKAM (Commission of Human Rights of Malaysia) itself acknowledging that the problems of customary land rights in Sarawak are in need to be resolved. All such findings have not been acted upon by the authorities.

Thirdly, logging companies operating in our areas rarely choose to consult us, not unless they are really forced to. Sometimes in their operations, not only our forest and river resources are damaged, but our farms would also be destroyed, as what had happened in Long Sayan and Long Belok. In this particular incident, we lost our rice fields in fallow and crops such as *ipoh* and other fruiting trees such as durian, rambutan and jackfruit which are our sources of food and income.

In many consultations and agreements between Penan villages and logging companies, we frequently felt pressured, even in the presence of authorities. In many cases, we would either be forced to "consent" to agreements which were unfair and unclear and lacking in the ability to provide any guarantee for us or to receive "compensation" of meagre value.

In such conditions, we were often denied choices which are fair and our original demand requesting for our rights to be respected were almost always effectively sidelined. When will logging companies stop from using such manipulative tactics when dealing with our concerns?

If we do not defend our rights today, after logging ends, our forests will be set to be destroyed by plantation schemes. SAMLING has reportedly begun wood planting in Sungai Belanah and Sungai Layun. This may destroy all the Penan customary territories of Long Latie, Long Kevok, Long Nen and Long Kawa di Tutoh until up to Long Lilim, Long Daloh, Long Lutin, Long Kawi and Long Itam di Ulu Sungai Patah.

Thus to avoid such blockades from being erected, the government must take all the appropriate actions.

Firstly, each Penan community, including those which are nomadic, must have their territories gazetted into Communal Forests, which cannot be encroached by logging and plantation companies. The

manner in which logging licences are issued must be further improved, taking into account and respecting native customary rights of local communities and in consultation with us.

Secondly, the government must provide us with the assistance to improve our standard of living. We are in desperate need for housing improvement projects, agriculture assistance – including reforestation of encroached areas to increase our sources of food and income – as well as assistance in birth and identity card registration, the construction of more schools and the rendering of healthcare services.

All these will help Penan communities out of poverty and increase their opportunities to be employed outside of their villages.

Thus we would like to appeal to the Sarawak State Government to begin an official process to gazette all Penan villages, including our village forest reserves, as Communal Forests, as provided for by the law and ensure that plantation and logging activities are stopped from encroaching into our territories.

If such steps fail to be taken, then incidents like blockades will most likely continue to take place in the future.

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