

tong tana

October 2006

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Blockade renewed: Penan from Long Benali reinforced their barrier against the bulldozers on 17 July 2006

Penan block logging roads

New protests against the lumber companies in Sarawak's rain forest

By the beginning of June 2006, Panai Irang had had enough. The Penan headman had been negotiating with the loggers for months, but to no avail. Four times he had set out on the five-hour walk from his village of Ba Abang on the middle reaches of the Baram River to the distant camp of the Interhill company. There, in the stifling corrugated metal barracks, he had asked the loggers to respect the traditional forest rights of his village and to discontinue the logging on communal territory. But the company's manager refused to discuss the matter: "That does not interest us. We have a valid license from the government and will continue our work as long as we find timber in the forest that can be used."

Now was the moment to do something decisive against the eight bulldozers that Interhill had brought into the area. Since the middle of 2005, when the company had made its first advances, the fishing grounds around the village have become polluted and the yield from hunting has declined. Now the company was in the process of destroying the last forest reserves in the area of the village's water catchments. It had already felled the most valuable trees by the end of the 1980's.

On June 16th, the time had come. Panai Irang, together with his own villagers and Penan helpers from the vicinity, constructed a blockade on the company's road. On the same day, the Penan confiscated the chain saws that the lumbermen were using to cut the trees close to the water catchments.

Elite police troops and “sorcerers” against the Penan

The company recognised the seriousness of the situation and withdrew its workers from the area of Ba Abang. Three weeks later they came back, together with police officers of the Federal Reserve Unit, a special unit trained to suppress demonstrations with force. Faced with the overwhelming strength of the police, the Penan fled into the forests. The fragile roadblock, comparable to a wooden fence, offered little resistance when the Interhill bulldozers flattened it on July 5th.



The situation has been tense in the village ever since the blockade was put down. Interhill turned to intimidation and, after the withdrawal of the police, even brought in a sorcerer who was supposed to frighten the villagers by using “magical powers”. But the Penan do not give up so easily. They were willing to return the confiscated chain saws only when they had the assurance that Interhill would respect their communal boundaries. Partial success has already been achieved: the company must stop the logging in the area of the village's water catchments. In this case, the Penan were fortunate in having an official from the Health Ministry deciding in favour of the villagers.

Blockade on the upper reaches of the Baram River still intact

Until now, the Penan from Long Benali on the upper reaches of the Baram have been luckier than those living in Ba Abang. The village of headman Sound Bujang has been blocking the planned construction of a logging road through communal territory since February 2004. The construction was planned by Samling which, like Interhill, has its headquarters in Miri, the second largest city of Sarawak. The maps available to the Bruno Manser Fonds show the planned course of the road through an area that was recently certified with the controversial MTCC timber label against the will of the Penan (see Tong Tana April 2005).

After putting a stop to the Ba Abang blockade, Samling wanted to take advantage of the situation and change matters in Long Benali as well. The company has been struggling with the stubborn resistance of the Penan on the upper reaches of the Baram since the 1990's. But on this part of the Baram River, the Penan have succeeded in protecting the large primeval forest area that is directly adjacent to the new Pulong Tau National Park.

At the instigation of Samling, local authorities requested the Penan to end to their blockade and withdraw by the middle of July. Headman Sound Bujang reacted quickly and appealed to the Bruno Manser Fonds for help. He asked for the international community to put pressure on the authorities in Malaysia. At the same time, the headman got reinforcements from neighbouring villages. On July 17th, the Penan renewed their blockade and, with a large banner, reaffirmed their demand for the loggers to leave.

International protests are taking effect

Sound Bujang's appeal met with an enormous echo. On July 7th, the Bruno Manser Fonds informed non-governmental organisations and media throughout the world about the emergency call from the rain forest. Friendly organisations in the USA, Japan, South Korea, Great Britain and Germany took up the cause and asked their members to write letters of protest and e-mails to Sarawak. At the instigation of “Save the Rainforest” in Hamburg alone, more than 3,500 people wrote to the Malaysian officials and the Samling company.

In view of the public pressure and the continuous opposition, Samling and the officials in Sarawak have renounced their plan to dismantle the blockade. Headman Sound Bujang is very pleased: “We are proud that so many people are supporting us. It greatly encourages our will to oppose.”

In spite of the present success, the Penan from Long Benali are worried about the coming months. They report that the inhabitants of the neighbouring Kelabit village Long Lellang have asked Samling to finally put an end to the Penan blockade and build the road that has been planned. There is still a strong need for the Bruno Manser Fonds.

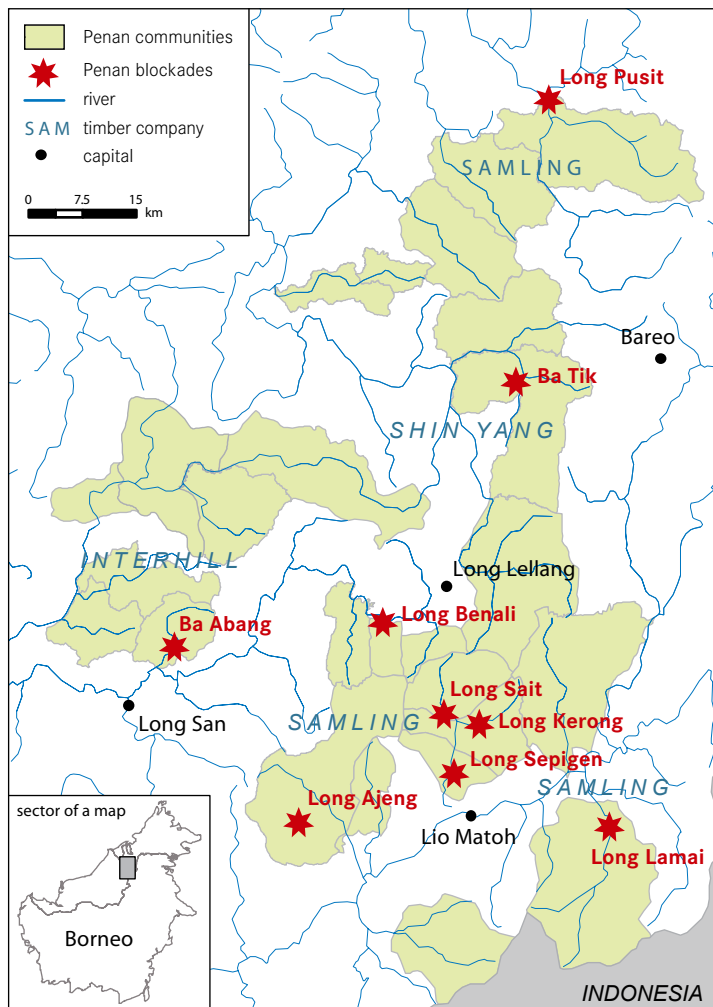
Lukas Straumann



“The Interhill logging company has polluted our drinking water. When it rains, we no longer have clean water in Ba Abang.”



The Penan from Long Benali have been defending themselves against the clearing of their rain forest since February 2004. (Photo March 2006)



Penan blockades: review of the results and status quo

The Penan have become known internationally since the middle of the 1980's for their peaceful blockades of logging roads. Although many of the blockades have been broken up by police force, they are still serving as a sign of resistance and as a means of exerting pressure in negotiations with the authorities and the timber companies. At present, the following Penan settlements are using blockades to defend themselves against logging.

Ba Abang: Blockade against Interhill set up on June 16th; confiscation of two chain saws by the Penan; overturned by Interhill with the help of the police and the Special Field Reserve Unit FRU on July 2, 2006.

Results: Partial success under precarious conditions. Logging discontinued in the area of the village's water catchments.

Long Benali: Blockade against the Samling company set up on February 10, 2004, and reinforced on July 17, 2006.

Results: Blockade successful. Threat to dismantle the blockade in the middle of July 2006 was averted.

Long Pusit (nomad group of Along Segai): Last blockade set up on March 23, 2006. Dispersed by Samling on March 26th.

Results: Blockade without much effect, situation precarious.

Long Sepigen / Long Kerong / Long Sait / Long Ajeng: After a wave of blockades between 1997 and 1998, a land rights lawsuit was filed against Samling.

Results: Blockade successful. No more logging since 1997.

Long Lamai: Following the blockades against Samling, the lumbermen set fire to part of the communal forests in 1998. At the end of 2004, the threat of a blockade once again stopped the advancing bulldozers.

Results: Resistance successful, logging stopped.

Ba Tik: The Shin Yang company felled extensive numbers of trees, and withdrew only in January 2005 following the threat of a blockade. Penan demarcated the community's territorial borders in March 2006.

Results: Partial success only after communal forests had been cut.

News in Brief

Healthcare clinic to be opened for Penan in November

In just a few weeks, the mini clinic planned by the Bruno Manser Fonds for the Penan in the rain forest of Sarawak will be officially opened. An opening ceremony, expected to attract numerous visitors from the region, is planned for the beginning of November. Roger Bühler, the Swiss medical doctor who has been in Long Kerong on the Selungo since the middle of July, has been working as a volunteer to accelerate the construction of the healthcare facility. The project has been made possible thanks to a generous contribution from the joint heirs of Barbara and Peter Nathan-Neher. Tong Tana will report on the opening ceremony.



Penan headmen in front of the mini clinic in Long Kerong. The power supply, installed by volunteers from the Bruno Manser Fonds, is completely dependent on solar energy.

Motion for a "rain-forest-friendly" federal administration

National Councilor Maya Graf has submitted a motion to the federal parliament for a "rain-forest-friendly" federal administration. The motion, formulated in agreement with the Bruno Manser Fonds, requires, amongst other things, that at least 50 percent of the paper used by the federal government is recycling paper. The share of recycling paper has been decreasing for some time, and accounted for only 33% in 2004.

In the meantime, 593 Swiss communities have declared themselves to be "forest friendly" and promised to renounce the use of wood and paper products from areas of over-exploitation (see Tong Tana April 2006). The communities in the cantons listed below have been added to the list in the last months:

Aargau: Aristau, Killwangen, Rothrist. Bern: Bleienbach, Bremgarten bei Bern, Hasle bei Burgdorf, La Heutte, Neueneegg, Niederhünigen, Oeschenbach, Rohrbachgraben, Rumendingen, Saint-Imier, Stettlen, Zuzwil. Baselland: Ziefen. Genua: Bardonnex. Jura: Glovelier, Le Noirmont. St Gallen: Gommiswald, Mels. Schaffhausen: Wilchingen. Schwyz: Ingenbohl. Vaud: Bière. Zurich: Affoltern am Albis, Hettlingen, Marthalen, Ossingen, Rheinau, Uetikon am See. For further information: www.urwaldfreundlich.ch

Refurbishing Bruno Manser's rain forest photographs

More than 10,000 photographs taken by Bruno Manser in the rain forest are in the archives of the Bruno Manser Fonds. The historian Isabelle Iser has spent the last year deciphering these pictures which are of great value in substantiating the land rights claims of the Penan. The inventory of photographs uniquely documents the culture of the last people of Southeast Asia who are living as nomads in the rain forest of Sarawak and the Penan's resistance to the destruction of their lebensraum.

In cooperation with Erwin Zbinden, the Basel photographer and data bank expert (picturebâle.ch), there are plans to make these treasures available to the public on Internet in the early summer of 2007.



Two camera teams were underway in Sarawak for more than eight weeks between last April and June, following the tracks through the rain forest of the environmental activist Bruno Manser who disappeared in May 2000 without leaving a trace. The difficult task of shooting (director: Christoph Kühn) was given logistic support by the Bruno Manser Fonds. At times, as many as forty Penan were helping the camera teams to find their way through the remote forest areas. The film, produced by the Zurich "Filmkollektiv", will be shown in cinemas at the beginning of 2007.

Impressum

Tong Tana means "in the forest" in the language of the indigenous Penan living in the rainforest of Sarawak (Malaysia)

Published by the Bruno Manser Fonds
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