



Tribes fight loggers to save Malaysian rainforests, but some natives welcome timber money

By VIJAY JOSHI, Associated Press Writer AP - Saturday, December 15

IN THE BORNEO RAINFOREST, Malaysia - Like a slithering red snake, the dirt road cuts through the jungles shrouding an endless row of hills.

At the first sign of humanity, the logging road stops abruptly: a crude barrier of branches tied together by dry palm fronds and a handwritten warning: "When We Say No, We Mean No."

In the middle of the ancient rainforest in Borneo, this simple blockade erected by a jungle tribe has become the symbolic frontline in the battle to protect forests from a logging industry eager to harvest the bounty that feeds much of the world's thirst for timber.

"Logging has been the biggest disaster for the forests, and its indigenous people," said Raymond Abin of the Borneo Resources Institute in Sarawak, Malaysia's biggest state that occupies a part of Borneo island.

The blockade "is the last resort of the natives after all processes of negotiations and consultations failed," he said.

Protection of forests is not just a Sarawak issue.

It is part of U.N. negotiations for a replacement to the Kyoto Protocol, amid new evidence that deforestation contributes to about 20 percent of global warming.

Leading the campaign in Sarawak are former headhunting tribes, who say logging is destroying their ancestral lands and snatching their customary rights over the forests. There are other concerns that logging has damaged Borneo's multimillion-year-old ecosystem and is pushing rare plant and animal species such as wild orchids and clouded leopard toward extinction.

The forests are "what you inherited from your ancestors. During the headhunting days they sacrificed their lives to defend it," said Harrison Ngau Laing, a lands rights lawyer who represents some of the tribes.

Laing, himself a tribesman, said some 100 legal cases have been filed by the tribes against logging companies and the government. None has been resolved.

But opinion is divided among the impoverished tribes, some of whom live in settlements so remote they can be reached only on foot after days of walking through jungle trails.

To them, the logging roads are a lifeline to civilization. In the absence of development, they see the logging companies as the bearer of basic needs such as clean water, electricity, toilets, schools and transportation.

"I want children to go to high school. I don't want them to stay here in the village where there is no school. Maybe when they come back they become doctor or teacher," said Seluma Jalong, a tribeswoman who taught herself to speak passable English.

Jalong, 36, lives in Long Main village, which is reached from the logging road after a five-hour walk and boat ride.

About 70 percent of Sarawak is covered by forests, which are home to 24 minority indigenous tribes including the Penan who number between 10,000 and 15,000.

Long Benalih, where some 28 Penan families live, is one community. The leaders of Long Benalih set up the blockade Nov. 8 on the road being built by Samling, Malaysia's second biggest logging company, which earned 9.1 billion Ringgit (US\$2.6 billion; ?1.91 billion) from wood exports in 2006.

Ajang Kiew, a Penan leader who lives in Apoh, a few hundred kilometers (miles) from the blockade site, said his area has already been flattened by logging.

"It is sad to look. There is nothing of the forest. That side is already red earth. At least there is forest left here," he said, accompanying two reporters to the blockade site.

Kiew stopped to pick out medicinal plants. "This one," he said bending down to touch a two-leaf plant, "is to relieve back pain. And this must be placed on a wound. It sucks out all the poison in the body."

Timber is Sarawak's second biggest export after oil and gas. The state government began giving concessions to logging companies in the 1960s, and widespread cutting of trees began in the 70s and 80s. It was not until the late 1990s that the government issued strict guidelines on controlled felling of trees.

The move was too late, said Abin who described bulldozers clear-cutting swaths of forests with trees as old as 500 years.

According to the Bruno Manser Fund, a Swiss-based activist group, more than 90 percent of Sarawak's primeval rainforests have been logged in the last 30 years. Re-growth has restored the greenery but the new trees are not of the same quality.

"There is an urgent need to preserve the remaining old-growth forests for future generations," said BMF's Lukas Straumann.

Samling, however, insists it practices sustainable logging. It has also voluntarily agreed to oversight by the private Malaysian Timber Certification Council in a large section of its 1.4 million hectare (3.46 million acre) concessions that will expire in 2018.

The council provides an internationally-accepted certification of good logging practices, which includes dividing a logging area into 25 blocks and harvesting them once in 25 years. This is supposed to give the forest time to regenerate.

Experts say the gap should be at least 45 years.

"By and large, it is fair to say that logging in this region is not sustainable," said Junaidi Payne of conservation group WWF's Borneo program. "The rate at which the forest is being cut is way beyond the rate at which it is regenerating."

Many of Samling's European customers of its plywood and sawn timber rely on MTCC's seal of approval, which expires in 2009. The MTCC certification also requires Samling to negotiate with tribes in the event of a conflict even though the company has the right to knock down the Penan blockade because it is on legal concession land, said James Ho, vice president of operations at Samling.

"We never bulldoze any area. It is not our policy because we need a good relationship with all stakeholders," he said. "After all the forest is our life. We cannot possibly destroy it."

Samling also says it does not encroach on the customary rights of the tribes, and allows them free access to forage for food. It has donated nearly 2 million Ringgit (US\$588,000; \$420,000) to the tribes as well as developing other projects, said Samling spokeswoman Cheryl Yong.

She said Samling employs 11,000 people in Malaysia of which 33.5 percent are indigenous people.

Ngau and Abin, the Malaysian activists, acknowledge that Samling which this year was listed on the Hong Kong Stock Exchange has been more pro-active in helping the tribes than the other big five privately-held timber companies.

"Since we listed globally we want to be transparent. We know we are under scrutiny," said Ho.