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+++ BREAKING NEWS +++

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Sarawak government refuses to recognize Penan Peace Park

Sarawak state forest director Len Talif Salleh has refuted the attempt of 17 indigenous Penan communities to protect 163,000 hectares of tropical forest in what could become an international model for a community-managed protected area

KUCHING, SARAWAK / MALAYSIA. As the world leaders who are gathered at the UN climate talks in Copenhagen are nearing a deal to protect tropical forests in a new REDD (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation) agreement, with the aim of enhancing forest carbon stocks in tropical countries, Sarawak authorities are making it clear that they do not intend to change their approach to dealing with forest matters and native rights. In today's Borneo Post, Sarawak state forest director and Acting Permanent Secretary to the Ministry of Planning and Resource Management, Len Talif Salleh, refutes the attempts of indigenous Penan leaders to protect their last remaining primary forests in Sarawak's Upper Baram region.

According to the Borneo Post, Len said the state "did not recognise this park as the communities had not consulted the relevant authorities on the matter" and because "the so-called peace park was located largely within the Permanent Forest Estate (PFE)", which is earmarked for logging by the Malaysian Samling Group. Len stated the international media reports on the Penan's proclamation "tainted Sarawak's image" and he accused the Penan of being "instigated and manipulated by foreign non-governmental organisations" which, according to Len, displayed a "post-colonial mentality".

In November, the leaders of seventeen Penan communities had met at Long Ajeng in Sarawak's Upper Baram region to celebrate the official opening of a 163,000 hectare tropical forest reserve. On the occasion, James Lalo Kesoh, the former pengulu (regional chief) of the Upper Baram region, said the Penan intended to preserve the basis of their livelihood and their cultural heritage, which was entirely in the forest.

The new "Penan Peace Park" has the potential to become an international model for a community-managed protected area in Malaysian Borneo's last remaining primary forests. Malaysia is a signatory to the Convention of Biological Diversity (CBD), as well as to the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People (UNDRIP). In February 2007, the Malaysian government committed itself to protecting the Borneo rainforests, together with Indonesia and Brunei, in the Heart of Borneo Declaration, a conservation initiative by the WWF.

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