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MEDIA RELEASE

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Leading Sarawak lawyer calls for Chief Minister Taib Mahmud to apologize with the Penan

Meeting between blockading Penan and officials ends without result - Penan announce to continue logging road blockades until their land rights are recognized

A meeting between native Penan leaders, government officials and logging company representatives from the East Malaysian state of Sarawak, which took place last Friday 28 August 2009, has ended without result. The meeting took place after three Penan communities erected logging road blockades in Sarawak's Apoh Tutoh region to protest against plantation plans that are jeopardizing their livelihood.

A Penan spokesperson announced that the communities would continue with the blockades until the Sarawak state government recognizes the Penan's landrights and commits to protect their forest reserves. On 20 August 2009, the Penan set up three logging road blockades at strategic locations to prevent several logging companies from extracting timber and from clearing the secondary forests for Acacia, Eucalyptus and Oil palm plantations.

Meanwhile, Harrison Ngau, a Goldman Prize-winning indigenous lawyer based in Miri, Sarawak, called for Chief Minister Taib Mahmud to resolve the issue. Taib is also Minister of Planning and Resource Management and as such responsible for issuing logging licences and plantation leases that are affecting customary lands of not only the Penan but also the Kayan, Kenyah, Berawan and Iban communities near the current blockade sites.

Harrison Ngau said to BMF: "Taib Mahmud is the one who arbitrarily issued the licences and the leases to the companies over the customary land of the Penan. Therefore, he is the one responsible for causing the problems faced by the Penan. As such he is the one who should go and meet them and also apologize to the Penan for destroying their land, their forests and for depriving them of their source of livelihood."

Harrison remarked that, despite all kinds of promises to the Penan in the past, their problems have not only remained unresolved but are actually worsening. As a spokesperson for the Sarawak Indigenous Lawyers Alliance (SILA), Harrison also stated that SILA is ready to provide legal backing to the Penan and any other natives arrested for putting up blockades to defend their customary land.

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