

# Land quarrels shatter calm in Land of the Hornbills

By 13 SEP 2001

By PATRICK CHALMERS in Kuching

COURT cases, sporadic protests and even killings over indigenous land rights issues are destroying the calm of Sarawak state on Borneo island.

Traditionally placid Ibans, Penans and other groups used to obeying their longhouse headmen and the authorities, are bristling at logging and plantation activity on land they say is ancestral.

Local campaigners point to a High Court victory indigenous groups won in May as a spur to dozens of others with suits against companies and the state, promising more legal battles whatever the case's outcome on appeal.

Just ice Ian Chin not only barred a pulp company access to part of a land concession, but also widened definitions of native ancestral land in a ruling campaigners said was a "significant precedent" for native land rights in Malaysia.

Yet growing conflicts over land, sparked by the authorities' policy of exploiting Sarawak's natural resources, are unlikely to affect the State Government's grip on power in upcoming local polls.

Chief Minister Tan Sri Abdul Taib Mahmud, whose time at the top matches Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's 20 years, believes the parties of his Barisan Nasional will do "quite well" in state elections due before November ends.

With incumbents in 58 of the 62 state assembly seats up for grabs, he's probably right not to be worried.

Exploitation of the rich mineral, agricultural and rainforest resources has helped lift state per capita gross national product from 1980's RM2,665 to 2000's estimated RM6,235 at constant prices.

Even in one of the poorer native communities downstream from the controversial Bakun dam site, the headman's home is equipped with stereo, TV and video powered for a few hours each night by an on-site generator.

But the basics appear neglected, with poor sanitation, and ablutions performed at the end of a rain-fed tap.

Surrounded by the marble pillars, chandeliers and gilded period furniture in his office, Taib, who succeeded his uncle as Chief Minister in 1981, said voters endorsed his ideas.

"People feel it is prosperous and they feel that we ought to continue this policy," the 65-year-old Taib told Reuters during an interview in state capital Kuching.

The small city stands where English adventurer James Brooke put to shore in 1839, quelling local rebels to win favour with the Sultan of Brunei.

His appointment as Sarawak's first white rajah began the reign of three Brookes, a line ending in 1941 with violent Japanese occupation in World War Two and eventual independence within Malaysia in 1963 along with Sabah and Singapore.

The throwing off of colonial control prompted a concerted development push in Sarawak, where the rajahs' classic divide-and-rule policy had previously left territories of many native groups intact to avoid confrontation.

Development since independence, while welcomed, has prompted disputes over who really owns the soil, reflected by 1999's killing of four land clearing contractors near Niah in the north eastern coastal part of the state.

Few people in Sarawak now seriously resist the tug of the 21st century. It is more a question of how fast they abandon old ways of jungle farming, fishing and hunting for the cash economy.

But many are unhappy at the division of state spoils, angry at laws they say sequester ancestral lands mainly to benefit well-connected oil palm planters, rainforest loggers and politicians.

"It was one of the hot propaganda (issues) introduced by the opposition at the last parliamentary elections but it was not based on fact," says Taib.

"It was more on manipulating perceptions," he added.

Others want money for the USSB.4 billion (US\$1 = KM3.80) 2,400MW Bakun hydro project to go instead for schools, hospitals and roads. They say by the time it is completed in 2005, it will generate far more power than local demand can use.

The same goes for nearly US\$1 billion lavished on wafer foundry 1st Silicon, Sarawak's bid for technology-hub status, which sparkles in pristine isolation on cleared former swamp land near Kuching.

"Of course, our people do not say we don't want development," says Raymond Abin of the Borneo Resources Institute, a local campaigner who may contest the election as an independent.

"In the first place, there must be genuine consultation with the people in the longhouses," he says. Longhouses are the traditional homes and meeting places for indigenous groups in parts of Borneo island.

Such thinking is common and key, particularly in national polls, as votes in Malaysia's largest state decide nearly 15 per cent of Parliament's 193 seats despite a population of less than a tenth of the country's 22 million citizens.

Whether it translates into dissident support in state polls, or national ones due by the end of 2004, is another thing.

Taib delivered 28 seats in 1999 towards the coveted two-thirds parliamentary majority won by Dr Mahathir's ruling coalition.

A rag tag, ill-funded opposition boasts a couple of state seats held by independents and two for the Peninsular-based DAP.

Par6 Keadilan Nasional, led by supporters of jailed former deputy prime minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, plans a state election debut fighting more than half the seats.

The conservative Pas, taking sizeable chunks of Dr Mahathir's support among Peninsular Malays, holds little appeal for Sarawak's myriad Iban, Chinese, Melanau and native groups like the Penans of the interior.

Local journalists in the state's tightly controlled media see scant prospect of more than a handful of opposition gains.

Whichever way people vote the grievances over land rights look like festering for a long time. — Reuters