

SAM: Timber council's priorities questionable
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The timber certification council's spirited defence of a logging giant's proposed road construction in Upper Baram, Sarawak, brings into question the credibility and legality of its certification scheme in relation to sustainability criteria, alleged an environmental group.

Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM) said it finds it perplexing that the Malaysian Timber Certification Council (MTCC) seems more interested in defending Samling Group's proposed building of a road to reach its logging concession area than the interests of the local people affected.

In a statement today, SAM president SM Mohamed Idris said that, contrary to claims by MTCC, nobody has 'instigated' the Penan community to oppose the construction of the road.

"The proposed road is in fact constructed in the mountain ridges between the Pengaran Iman and Benalih Rivers. Now its construction is affecting a tributary of the Pengaran River, causing serious pollution problems to the Pengaran Iman communities as well," said Idris.

The Long Benalih and Pangaran Iman have of their own accord chosen to lodge complaints against violations of their Native Customary Rights at the SAM office in Marudi, he said.

"We strongly object to accusations that imply our assistance to the communities as hasutan (instigation), which in itself appears to imply that the people are not able to think for themselves," Idris said.

He noted that the Penan do not oppose the construction of the road per se, but have demanded only that their agreement is obtained together with the assurance that the road will not be utilised for logging in their territories.

"The people also conveyed their preference for the road construction to be overseen by the responsible government agency, suggesting that fewer problems would be encountered if this was the case," he pointed out.

Idris further noted that Samling's 'social concern' for local communities and its need for an access road were questionable, given the tendency of logging companies to abandon such infrastructure once logging is completed.

"Isn't it true that sections of both the Sungai Apoh-Patah-Akah and the Long Bedian-Layun-Tutoh routes can no longer be used today since companies that used to log in the areas have moved elsewhere and have stopped maintaining them?"

"Thus, how far can we entrust logging companies to build roads for local communities when many of them have shown no interest in maintaining these roads once their harvesting is done? Isn't it cheaper to maintain existing routes than to construct new ones?"

'Respect wishes'

Idris also dismissed MTCC's claims that a liaison committee - comprising state and company officials as well as representatives of the indigenous communities - takes into account local concerns and objections to logging activities.

Citing a meeting between the Penan and human rights commissioner Dr Dension Jayasooria, Idris said the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia had found 'gaps and contradictions' between statements of the Miri Resident Office, the companies and the people.

"We find it perplexing that a certification body is extending itself to defend the road construction proposal undertaken by a logging company.

"MTCC should instead respect the wishes of local people and be more concerned about providing adequate protection to small pockets of community forests from multinational logging companies.

"In this light can the credibility of the MTCC scheme and its legality and sustainability claims hold much water?"

The war of words between SAM and the MTCC has been going on over the past two weeks in the media .

SAM has claimed that the authorities, MTCC and Samling have ignored the objections of the Penan communities of Long Benalih and Pangaran Iman to the company's plans to log its concession area of the Sela'an-Linau forest - one of the country's last primary forests.

Citing fears that logging activities would cause serious environmental and social disruption, the Long Benalih community had prevented the construction of the access road that would run through their ancestral land.

Last February, however, their three-year blockade at a strategic entry-point into Samling's forest management unit - certified in 2003 by MTCC - was dismantled by police personnel and workers for the company.

MTCC, on the other hand, has claimed that the blockade was removed by the state authorities as it had become a "development issue" and due to appeals from other indigenous communities such as in Long Lellang whose daily life had been adversely affected by the blockade.

Among the hardships, said MTCC, were the communities' lack of easy access to the nearest town, for their children to go to school and for emergency purposes.

It also said the blockade had also led to problems in transporting subsidised agricultural materials and equipment such as fertilisers and pipes, to the shortage and high price of fuel and cooking gas, problems in electricity supply, and access to medical treatment and equipment.