

## **Mighty river polluted by oil palm plantations**

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Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM) is gravely concerned about the adverse impacts of newly established large-scale plantations in Marudi on its local communities, which include ill health, livelihood issues and native customary rights (NCR) violations.

From around the Bakong River (tributary of Baram) heading upstream towards the Kayan settlement in Long Maro, Tinjar, oil palm plantations is in operation on the right bank of the Baram. Meanwhile, from the Ridan River area (another Baram tributary), heading upstream towards the Linei tributary in Tutoh, a pulp and paper plantation sits on the left bank of the Baram.

Today, more than 2,000 villagers from nine longhouses are faced with the worsening pollution of their rivers. We believe that land clearing activities as well as pesticide use in these newly established plantations are likely causes for the increased level of pollution of the Baram.

It appears that contaminants, including untreated agro-chemical residues, may be flowing freely into the Baram from the plantations' drainage system. As a result, villagers today are experiencing skin problems and allergies despite the fact that they have already alerted the authorities on this matter.

The larger community in the Marudi township is also worried of the deteriorating quality of their water supply, directly sourced from the Baram.

Similarly, the fish population in rivers and horseshoe lakes ('loagan' in local language) also appears to be in decline after the establishment of the plantations. Local fishers have been experiencing a marked drop in their catch, with their income significantly affected.

At the same time, the plantations themselves do not provide local communities with great job opportunities, contrary to what the state has often claimed. Plantation operators prefer to hire foreign labourers from Indonesia to cut costs.

In short, local people really do not have much to gain from these plantations but in fact more to lose, as a result of the deterioration of their environment and natural resources.

Besides health issues, the villagers are also complaining about the violations of their NCR by the plantation companies. This has been the case for the Iban in Sungai Buloh, Bakong, the Kiput Islam in Lubok Nibong and the Narum Malays in Marudi.

It is an outstanding Sarawak problem that provisional leases (PL) for plantations, as with logging licences, are issued without transparency and prior consultations with affected communities. Compounding the problem is the failure of the state to institute a participatory joint-boundary demarcation process with communities.

As long as all these are not meaningfully addressed, such land-related disputes will continue to arise and worsen in Sarawak, because the NCR are indeed legitimate claims of native communities. Their principles have been thoroughly described by our Federal Court and as such, failure to respect the NCR is in itself a failure to respect the law.

Bearing all of the above, we urge all the respective Sarawak authorities to take immediate steps to restore the water quality of Baram and its tributaries, ensuring that it is safe for both the consumption and use of the people.

We also request that the state immediately call for a stakeholder consultation process with plantation-affected communities in Marudi. This process must work towards resolving all the related issues, from water pollution, dwindling fishing catches to the violations of the people's NCR.

In respect of the NCR, the state must labour towards establishing a participatory boundary demarcation and the free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) processes. If affected landowners refuse to allow plantations activities on their land, such land must be immediately excluded from any licensed areas. Issues of damages and compensation must also be comprehensively addressed in these processes.

We call the Sarawak state government to act with immediate urgency on this matter.

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