

**Global Witness accepts Taib's dare to open debate**  
**Malaysian Insider**  
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**By Jahabar Sadiq**

KUALA LUMPUR, April 19 — Global Witness has accepted Tan Sri Abdul Taib Mahmud's challenge to an open debate about the activist group's allegations of corruption, land grabbing and tax evasion in Sarawak shown in its video "Inside Malaysia's Shadow State" released last month.

In a statement to The Malaysian Insider today, Global Witness said it accepted the invitation from the Sarawak chief minister that was made in The Malaysian Observer online television earlier this month.

"In an interview with the 'Let's Talk' programme on The Malaysian Observer, you challenged Global Witness to a debate on the allegations of corruption, land grabbing and tax evasion shown in the film 'Inside Malaysia's Shadow State'.

"We are writing to accept your invitation," said Global Witness in the letter copied to The Malaysian Insider on the eve of Nomination Day for Malaysia's May 5 general election.

The group also provided a document it said was in response to comments made by Taib about its research into the allegations of wrongdoing in Sarawak's timber trade.

"Appended to this letter is a short briefing outlining statements by you and Second Minister of Resource Planning and Environment Awang Tengah that seek to portray Sarawak's timber and plantation industries as sustainable, and Global Witness' responses to these claims.

"As you will see, our sources include analysis of the latest satellite imagery, publicly available information from the Sarawak Forest Department, environmental impact assessments completed for Sarawak forestry companies and the International Tropical Timber Organisation, which you yourself regularly cite," the group said.

Global Witness also gave the long-serving Sarawak chief minister four conditions to ensure an "open and transparent" debate.

The conditions are:

- A guarantee from the Sarawak and Malaysian governments that Global Witness staff can safely and freely enter and exit the country and Sarawak, that the debate is broadcast live on the Internet and is moderated by an independent professional, and that it take place in front of an impartial public audience, including any members of Malaysian civil society who wish to attend;
- That you provide full disclosure of any directorial or shareholder interests that you or members of your family hold — including through nominees — in companies holding timber and plantation licences, and land titles in Sarawak.

This should include specifying the circumstances by which the Ministry of Resource Planning and Environment arrived at the decision to direct Sarawak Forest Department and/or Sarawak Land and Surveys to issue the said licences and land titles;

- That you provide full disclosure of assets in offshore jurisdictions of which you and/or your

family are beneficial owners;

- That you provide full disclosure of any legal cases or financial dealings that have involved the lawyer Alvin Chong acting on behalf of you or the Sarawak government's interests.

Global Witness did not give a time frame for the debate but said that "we look forward to hearing from you soon" in the letter to Taib.

In his interview, the chief minister had accused the international environmental activist group of having a hidden agenda by visiting Malaysia's biggest state in a "sneaky way" and also suggested links between Global Witness and opposition parties.

"The timing is too much to ignore ... I think there is a link between them and the opposition," said Taib, who noted the release of a video showing how illegal land deals are allegedly brokered in the state happened just before with Election 2013 which will be held soon.

Global Witness' accusations against him were also the result of second-hand information obtained from the Bruno Manser Fund (BMF), Taib added.

He refuted accusations that only five per cent of forests is left in the state, saying that the true picture can be found by looking at the state using Google's satellite images.

Google maps the Earth using periodic shots taken using satellite imagery and aerial photography in its applications Google Earth and Google Maps.

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