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Mega dams
threaten the rainforest

tong tana

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Mega dams threaten the rainforest

Corruption as the main motivation behind new plans for hydro-electric power in Sarawak

by Annina Aeberli

The sun's rays glisten on the impressive river through the primeval forest, smaller and larger waterfalls keep on appearing on both the left and the right, the plants and trees seem to be competing as to which one can radiate the most intense colours, and a unique fragrance of blossom fills the air. Compared with the force of the river Baram and the density of the forest, visitors travelling by boat appear hardly bigger than ants.

This, however, is a threatened paradise. If the Sarawak government has its way, 150 square kilometres of the Baram valley are going to be flooded. A gigantic industrialisation project would make the rainforest disappear under water for ever. The project has been given the name of "Sarawak Corridor of Renewable Energy" (SCORE) and it is huge. A total of fifty possible sites in the whole of Sarawak are under consideration for the construction of dams. Twelve dams are already being built or are in the planning phase.

On every available occasion, the highly corrupt head of Sarawak's government, Taib Mahmud, announces that SCORE and the hydro-electric power generated through the project are to be "triggers for growth and development in Sarawak". The fattest profit, however, will go to Cahya Mata Sarawak (CMS), the construction company under the control of his family, which enjoys a cement monopoly in Sarawak.

"A tsunami created by human beings is going to destroy everything."

What Taib's pompous plans for dams mean for the indigenous inhabitants of the rainforest are resettlement, suffering and the destruction of their traditional way of life. Peter L., a Kenyah from Long Anap on the banks of the Baram, is at a total loss contemplating the government's dam project: "A tsunami created by human beings is going to pick up speed and destroy everything: rivers, forest, harvest, villages, simply everything!"

It is not only Sarawak's unique plant and animal world that is affected by the plans to build dams. Tens of thousands of indigenous inhabitants are to be brushed aside by this insanity. In the case of the largest of the planned dams, the Baram Dam, 20 000 Kenyah, Penan and Kayan are to be robbed of their land and villages – and their homes too – if a stop is not put to the project soon.



The Akah, a tributary of the river Baram, as seen from the Penan village of Long Beku. This village would be under 60 metres of water if the plan to build a dam were to become reality.

“We live off the rainforest. Where shall we go, if it’s flooded?” asks Wilson B., a Penan from the small settlement of Long Beku within the territory to be flooded as a result of the planned Baram Dam. The Penan of Long Beku, like all the local communities, depend on an intact rainforest. For these Penan, the forest and the rivers are not only their habitat but their livelihood too. Their hunting and fishing catches provide their staple food, which is supplemented with rice they grow themselves and vegetables. Since there are no water mains in the village, water has to be carried there from the river. Even without the threat of the dam, life with its everyday challenges is a struggle for the Penan. The hygienic situation, for instance, is critical, since there is not one single toilet in the village, nor is there any electricity either.

The Kenyah of Long Anap, directly on the river Baram are not quite as badly off as some of the others. There is a road in their village, and the occasional car is to be seen there. Even though the parliamentary representative of the Baram region comes from here, the village is not convinced by the government’s propaganda, promising prosperity and development as a result of the dam. “The dam is going to bring nothing but harm to us. Only a few people are in favour of it, namely those whose positions depend on the government”, says John K. in a quiet voice. As a rice farmer and rubber tapper, he is afraid of losing his land. His sister, Maria, doubts whether the threatened flooding of her habitat can genuinely be called development, as the government keeps on emphasising.



“Where is there for us to go, if it all gets flooded?”
Kenyah women Grace M. and Jenny F. from Long Selatong



“I won’t let it happen that my father has to die a second time.”

It is, however, not only the forest and fields as the lifeblood of Baram culture that are threatened. The indigenous peoples of the Baram region are also lamenting the loss of their history and their social cohesion, which it defined strongly through their ancestors. “Those of us alive today can at least run away when the water comes, but what are the dead going to do?” asks Maria from Long Anap.

For Thomas M., a retired secondary teacher from Long San, it is the threatened flooding of his father’s grave that gives him the force to fight against the dam. With tears in his eyes, he tells us: “my father died in 2002. I won’t let it happen that they flood his grave, so that my father dies a second time. I’m going to fight against the dam.” He and his friends have hung a small banner by his father’s grave, in a prominent place for everyone on the boats passing on the river to see: “Stop Baram Dam”. The Bruno Manser Fund is resolute in supporting Thomas M. and his friendly in their fight against the flooding of their habitat in the Sarawak rainforest. ■





The dams threaten to flood a unique animal and plant world.

Gigantism in dam development despite a surfeit of electricity

The twelve planned new dams in Sarawak form the backbone of an immense industrialisation project known as SCORE. The very name “Sarawak Corridor of Renewable Energy” is deceptive. New energy is to be produced not only from the construction of dams but also from the exploitation of gigantic coal reserves in the rainforest. It is planned to supply the energy to big new industrial projects, such as an aluminium foundry with a gluttonous appetite for energy. At the same time, it is planned to build even more roads to penetrate the rainforest and to facilitate access for logging operations and palm-oil plantations. The plans are for SCORE to exploit Sarawak’s hydro-electric potential of 28000 megawatts as intensively as possible, which ought to be seen in relation to the current peak demand of 972 megawatts and an expected demand of at most 1500 megawatts up to 2020! Compared with these figures, the Bakun Dam, which has just been completed with an installed power of 2400 megawatts, would have the capacity to produce more than enough electricity for the whole of Sarawak.

Once again, the person behind this mindless gigantism is Sarawak’s insatiable head of government, Taib Mahmud, who is hoping for lucrative profits and bribes for himself and the contracting and plantation companies controlled by his family. It is, however, others who are to pay the price for it.

Bakun Dam: Visit to the cordoned-off area

The flooding of the Baram valley would not be the first tragedy of this kind in Sarawak. The controversial Bakun Dam has already caused 10000 indigenous inhabitants to be driven out of their villages, and an area of rainforest the size of Singapore has been flooded. Transparency International describes the largest dam in southeast Asia, which was completed in 2010, as a “monument to corruption”.

Construction of the Bakun Dam was launched in 1995, but was subject to repeated delays for various reasons, including funding problems, conflicts between project partners and protests. In the 1990s, Bruno Manser himself campaigned actively against the dam, which, according to official figures, was to cost the equivalent of 2.5 billion Swiss francs. The true costs are very much higher than that. The European Siemens and Alstom groups were also involved in constructing it.

The Bruno Manser Fund has now become the first international organisation to go into the cordoned-off area behind the gigantic Bakun dam wall. What is to be seen there is an appalling picture. The trees are literally drowning before the eyes of onlookers! The water level is rising, and the giants of the primeval forest are

changing colour from green to brown and then to grey, until their last leafless branches disappear under water. There are several hundred people living on the Bakun Reservoir too, on so-called floating houses. They have resisted the government's resettlement plans and are courageously standing up to the flooding of their homeland.

Most of the indigenous inhabitants affected (Kayan, Kenyah, Penan, Ukit and Kajang) were resettled in Sungai Asap in 1998. They are deeply disappointed and feel betrayed, since the government had promised them good houses, lots of land and free electricity. However, hardly any of these promises have been kept, and compensatory payments have been withheld. The allocated land is too small for growing families, and the soil is of a poor quality. All around the settlement there is nothing but palm-oil monocultures and no rainforest in which to go hunting. In the past, they used to be able to live off their land and the forest. Today, they are forced to buy their food.

Many of those resettled are suffering from a lack of prospects for the future and the loss of traditional jobs and leisure activities. The consumption of alcohol has increased correspondingly. There is not much of the promised development to be seen in Sungai Asap.



As part of the resettlement plans for Sungai Asap, it is true that the government had copies of the indigenous people's long houses built, but lower-quality materials were used for them.



The Bakun Dam is one of the largest barrages in southeast Asia.



Sarawak's mega dams: Construction and planning stop demanded

The Bruno Manser Fund and the "Save Sarawak Rivers" network, a coalition of affected indigenous communities, are demanding a stop to construction and planning work on the mega dams in Sarawak.

- *Even more dams in Sarawak are economically superfluous. It would make more sense for the Sarawak government first of all to occupy itself with finding a meaningful use for the surplus energy from the Bakun Dam.*
- *The cost of the new dams is enormous and is going to trap the Sarawak state in debt for decades to come. Moreover, it seems most unlikely that these projects are ever going to be profitable. The principal beneficiary is the highly corrupt head of the Sarawak government, members of whose family are amongst those profiteering from all the larger projects in Sarawak.*
- *The social consequences for the tens of thousands of people affected would be horrendous. The Sarawak government has demonstrated clearly in constructing the Bakun Dam that it does not respect international standards and human rights. The people*

affected were not informed, and the compensation paid has only been partial. When they were resettled, they were forced to give up their traditional way of life.

- *The ecological consequences of the new dams would be disastrous. River and forest landscapes which exist nowhere else in the world apart from Borneo would be destroyed for ever, and the animal and plant world would be threatened. Apart from that, dams cause the emission of large quantities of greenhouse gases, which fuel climate change even further.*
- *As an engineering project, the Bakun Dam also constitutes a safety risk. When it was built, shoddy work was done, and the cement was adulterated. The Sarawak government is not in a position to guarantee that the planned projects will in any way differ from the Bakun Dam in constituting safety risks.*

Support our campaign and sign the enclosed protest card addressed to the Malaysian government!

Visit our campaign website:

www.stop-corruption-dams.org

“It is only our rulers who are profiting from the construction of this dam.”

*Interview with Peter Kallang,
chair of the “Save Sarawak Rivers” network*

Tong Tana: What is your view of the plans of the Sarawak government to construct twelve new dams?

Peter Kallang: My view is that there is no good reason to construct these dams, since we already have enough electricity available to us. The government has, after all, already constructed the infamous Bakun Dam and is currently constructing the Murum Dam. We don't need this electricity. The only explanation for these projects is that our government wants to construct these dams in its own interest and not for the people of Sarawak.

Who is going to profit from the dams and the job of constructing them?

These dams are planned for regions with dense forests. That means that certain companies, which have ties with our rulers, are able to profit from chopping down trees even before construction work starts. The same businesses are then awarded the contracts for constructing the dams and supplying the materials, for instance the cement that is needed. So the same people profit

not just once but several times over. The labourers to do the construction work are recruited abroad, especially in China. In Sarawak it is only our rulers who profit from the construction of these dams.

What do these dams mean for the indigenous Sarawak inhabitants?

Nearly all our communities live directly on the rivers or near to them. If a dam is built, those affected are forced to move and build up a new livelihood in another place. That is extremely difficult for farmers who have hardly any resources of their own apart from their land. Dams, however, not only threaten our livelihood; our cultural heritage is lost too. Being uprooted destroys the social bases of our longhouse culture for ever.

What lessons are there to be learnt from the mega dam already completed on the river Bakun?

We have learnt not to trust the government's promises. In the case of the Bakun Dam, those affected were promised houses, land and infrastructure, such as mains water, mains electricity, and so on. Hardly anything of it was done in practice.

How are you standing up to the planned dams?

We are acting a step at a time. Our “Save Sarawak Rivers” network is currently planning a large conference, at which those affected from all the regions can pool their experience and obtain information. Furthermore, the authorities are to be made

Peter Kallang

Since the end of 2011, Peter Kallang (62) has been chair of the “Save Sarawak Rivers”, which is campaigning along with the Bruno Manser Fund against the Taib government’s plans for dams. The retired engineer worked for many years for Shell Sarawak, where he chaired the trades unions. Today, he is also actively involved in an indigenous organisation called Orang Ulu National Association and in the Catholic Church.



aware of our vexation through letters, demonstrations and blockades. We are also attempting to take legal action against the expropriation of our traditional territories. The only way that these plans for dams can really be stopped is through international pressure.

What is your personal motivation for fighting against the dams?

I would like to help those affected by resettlement, since I feel very fortunate myself. I am admittedly not rich, but I have enjoyed a good education and I earn enough. That is the good fortune that I should like to share with others. If we don’t defend Sarawak’s beauty, then we’ll lose it. I wouldn’t like to wake up one morning and realise that I had done nothing, although I could have done something.

Peter Kallang, thank you very much for talking to us!

Interview: Annina Aeberli

News in brief

BMF demands the arrest of Taib, the head of the Sarawak government.

In a registered letter addressed in December 2011 to the Attorney General of Malaysia, the head of the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) and Malaysia's top police officer, the Bruno Manser Fund and an international coalition of NGOs called for the arrest and criminal prosecution of Abdul Taib Mahmud ("Taib"), the head of the government of the Malaysian federal state of Sarawak, and thirteen members of his family. The politician, who has been in power for three decades, and his family are accused of systematic corruption, abuse of public office, fraud, money laundering abroad and conspiracy to create a criminal organisation. Research carried out by the Bruno Manser Fund has revealed that the Taib family has holdings worth several billion US dollars in more than 400 companies in 25 countries and offshore financial centres.

FINMA investigation into Taib's assets: Federal Council invokes bank secrecy

During question time in the National Council (one of the two houses of the Swiss federal parliament), the minister of finance, Eveline Widmer-Schlumpf, declined to give any substantive information on the question of whether or not the Federal Financial Market Supervisory Authority (FINMA) had found any assets belonging to the Malaysian despot Abdul Taib Mahmud ("Taib") in Switzerland. The minister of finance told parliament that FINMA could only act as "the supervisory authority" and had neither the powers nor the right to disclose information to the outside. It was not possible for anyone to receive information "with the exception of those directly affected".

The Swiss federal minister of finance was answering a question tabled by a Green member of the National Council, Maya Graf (photo), on the progress made by FINMA's



clarification of assets belonging to politically exposed persons (PEPs) from Sarawak, Malaysia. The clarification was launched after the then Federal President, Micheline Calmy-Rey, had forwarded an inquiry from the Bruno Manser Fund to FINMA. In spring 2011, Switzerland froze assets running to three digits of millions in the names of north African PEPs in the process of the "Arab spring".

The Bruno Manser Fund expressed its disappointment at the lack of transparency

surrounding the FINMA investigation, referring to it as a missed opportunity. The BMF reiterates its demand that any assets belonging to the Taib family in Switzerland be identified and frozen.

Generous donation from Biberburg

Biberburg donates 5% of its catering proceeds every year to an environmental project closely concerned with forests. For many years now, this sum has been donated to the Bruno Manser Fund. Biberburg is an ecological building with a unique atmosphere, which was initiated and constructed by an association called "Verein Wald Hirschthal" and the volunteers working for it. Biberburg is a meeting place for nature, culture and socialising. Following a presentation about the work of the Bruno Manser Fund and a discussion on the subject of the rainforest, Urs Gsell, one of Biberburg's initiators, and Martha Buob, head of its catering team (second from left),



handed over the donation of 8053 francs, for which they had been proud to work hard, to Annina Aeberli, the BMF's campaign manager (far left) on 18 January 2012. The voucher was handed over in the form of a piece of wood – Swiss timber, naturally! Thank you very much for the donation and for your commitment!

20 years BMF: Celebrations and film week

The Bruno Manser Fund is celebrating its twentieth anniversary with various events in May 2012. The annual general meeting has

been scheduled for 12 May 2012, which is when the main celebrations will also be held with guests from Switzerland and abroad. In addition to that, a week of films dealing with the rainforest is to be organised in Basel between 10 and 16 May. Some of the films were made by Bruno Manser himself, such as "Tong Tana", or feature Bruno Manser as their main subject, such as "Laki Penan". The programme will, however, also include more recent films, portraying in depth the current threats to the rainforest, such as the creation of palm-oil plantations and the construction of dams. The evening programme is intended for interested members of the public, whereas schools can attend free-of-charge during the day.



What the future holds in store for the Kenyah children of Long Anap is far from certain.

Impressum

Tong Tana means “in the forest” in the language of the indigenous Penan population of the Sarawak rainforest (Malaysia).

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