



The Borneo Project

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for the peoples of the rainforest

Media Briefing: IHA Protests in Kuching, Sarawak, Malaysia

“Our community has lived in Baram and practised our traditional method of shifting cultivation for hundreds of years. If our land is drowned by the Baram dam it would be a total loss for us. The impact will be felt for generations to come.”

-- James Nyurang Usang, Headman of Tanjung Tepalit, Baram, Sarawak, Malaysia

Introduction

On May 21-24, the International Hydropower Association (IHA), the industry lobby that promotes large dams, will hold its biennial world congress in Kuching, Sarawak. The congress will showcase the Sarawak government's plans to build up to 12 large dams, submerging the forests that are home to 20 indigenous groups. Three dams have already been built on indigenous lands in Sarawak and have had devastating effects on both communities and the environment. Corruption in the Sarawak government is rampant and well-documented. As the IHA promotes the dams as the future of Sarawak, a local indigenous movement called SAVE Rivers is actively fighting for the rights of indigenous communities, and working to ensure that no more dams are built.

Background on Southeast Asia's Largest Development Scheme

The government of Sarawak and its state-owned energy utility Sarawak Energy Berhad (SEB) plan to build 12 dams, with the goal of completing 6 of them by 2020. These dams are part of what the government calls the SCORE (Sarawak Corridor of Renewable Energy) Initiative. Although Sarawak already has enough energy to meet its demand in the coming years, the government plans to provide cheap electricity to attract dirty, energy-intensive industrial investments. With US\$105 billion of costs until 2030, SCORE is South East Asia's most capital-intensive project.

The dams have met with unprecedented resistance from indigenous communities and civil society groups in Malaysia. For decades, indigenous communities in Sarawak have faced human rights violations as palm oil and timber companies encroached on their land with government support. Indigenous leaders formed the SAVE Sarawak Rivers Network (SAVE Rivers) in October 2011 to coordinate efforts to oppose the dams. SAVE Rivers unites affected communities, NGOs and concerned individuals and acts as a driving force in educating communities about the impacts of dam expansion on the rights of indigenous peoples.

Here is a brief outline of dam development in Sarawak:

- **1981:** Abdul Taib Mahmud becomes Chief Minister of Sarawak, and sells off traditional indigenous lands to timber and palm oil companies.
- **1982:** Construction begins on the Batang Ai dam, which displaced around 3,000 people.
- **1998:** Sarawak government resettles over 10,000 indigenous people living near the Bakun Dam site. Over one decade later, most of these people live in extreme poverty.
- **2007:** Malaysia endorses the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.
- **2008:** Construction begins on the Murum Dam, the first of the “SCORE” dams.

- **2011:** Indigenous activists opposed to the SCORE dams create the “SAVE Rivers” network.
- **2011:** Construction finishes on the Bakun Dam, Asia’s largest dam outside of China.
- **2012:** SAVE Rivers files a complaint against Taib and Sarawak Energy Berhad CEO, Norwegian Torstein Dale Sjøtveit, at the Malaysia Anti-Corruption Commission.
- **2012:** Indigenous people blockade the Murum Dam for one month after obtaining a leaked copy of the project’s resettlement plan.
- **2012:** Rio Tinto and Hydro Tasmania back off from SCORE after strong criticism from SAVE Rivers and international allies.
- **2013:** Work begins on the Baram Dam access roads although the project is not formally approved.

Sarawak Dams are Not “Best Practice”

- **Impacts on Communities:** Over 10,000 people were displaced by the Bakun Dam. Communities have been forced to relocate to land where they cannot cultivate, plant, harvest, gather, hunt, and or fish. As a result, many from these regions migrated to towns and plantations for work despite having no previous participation in the cash economy. The 944MW Murum Dam, first of the 12 SCORE dams to be built, will flood the homes of 1,500 people. SEB began construction on the Murum Dam before it even started the project’s environmental and social impact assessment. The ESIA has still not been made available to the public. Indigenous communities were forced to negotiate a resettlement deal without understanding the full extent of the dam’s impacts and without independent legal and technical advice. Likewise, the 1200MW Baram Dam, next in line, will displace around 20,000 indigenous people and flood about 412 square kilometers of land. A second, 250MW dam, is also planned for Baram.
- **Impacts on the Environment and Climate:** Over 70,000 hectares of land have been flooded by the Bakun Dam alone, submerging rainforest, home not only to communities, but also to endangered species, including the orangutan, the rhinoceros hornbill, and the clouded leopard. Dam reservoirs are a significant source of methane—a greenhouse gas 25 times stronger than CO₂—and are responsible for almost 4-5% of all human-caused global warming.
- **Corruption:** The Sarawak government has been run for the last 32 years by Chief Minister Abdul Taib Mahmud. During this time period, Taib and his close family members amassed stakes in 400 companies worldwide, 332 of them in Malaysia. His empire is mainly based on companies profiting from government contracts in Sarawak for palm oil, logging and construction. Taib has furthermore failed to account for MYR 4.8 billion / US\$ 1.58 billion of government expenditure in the previous three years alone. The recently completed Bakun dam was dubbed a “monument of corruption” by Transparency International. The current state government controls the information that the public receives about the SCORE dams through its absolute control over mainstream media, including newspapers, TV, and radio. A recent investigation by Global Witness caught several members of Taib’s family admitting on video to corruption in their companies’ deals inside Sarawak.

The Role of the IHA in Promoting the Sarawak Dams

The IHA is actively promoting the Sarawak dams in several ways. SEB’s chief executive officer sits on the board of the IHA. The companies developing the SCORE dams—including SEB, Hydro Tasmania, China Three Gorges Corporation, and Sinohydro—are sponsoring the IHA’s Congress in Sarawak. IHA members are also providing advisory services for the Murum and Baram projects. SEB is relying on the IHA’s new voluntary tool, called the Hydropower Sustainability Assessment Protocol (HSAP), to manage the environmental and social risks of the SCORE dams.

SEB is one of 13 dam companies worldwide that have committed to doing an HSAP assessment since the tool’s launch in 2011. In 2012, SEB announced that it had undertaken an HSAP

assessment on Murum dam, which has yet to be published. Nevertheless, as host for the IHA Congress, SEB will profile the Murum dam as best practice.

Critics point out that a lack of external stakeholder oversight of HSAP assessments may create an incentive for developers to greenwash the evidence base in order to receive higher scores.

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