

Sarawak's logging: Carrots, sticks and lies

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Keruah Usit (Malaysiakini News)

Henneson Bujang walked with slow, sure steps through the emerald rainforest. The steep trail was thick with creepers and low branches. The canopy overhead provided shelter from the noon sun.

This was the quiet time of day when most birds and insects had been lulled to sleep by the moist heat. As Henneson led the way, a few cicadas and frogs broke the silence.

Henneson, a fit, well-built 53-year-old, stopped and listened. "Can you hear the chainsaw? It's only fifteen minutes' walk downhill ... over there," he gestured in the direction of the barely audible, stubborn whine.

"The company built a logging track up the mountain. They drove their bulldozers all the way to our source of water on the mountain. We could see the oil slicks when the machines were not there," Henneson said in fluent Malay.

"We blockaded the road to get the company to discuss their intrusion. We've always been willing to listen to their point of view. But the company never talked to us, so we put up the blockade.

"The company said we were breaking the law, because the company had a licence from the government. We asked the company: how could there be such an unfair law?

"How could the law take the forest away from poor villagers to give to a company from the town? The company started taking the forest without even asking us. We have to stop the company trespassing on our land."

Henneson breached the forest cover. He stepped onto the logging track. The narrow soil track was a long, barren smear of yellow across the green slope. The sun baked down on Henneson's head. He showed the way to the flimsy Long Benali blockade.

The blockade at Long Benali, Sarawak, is the longest continuous anti-logging protest in Sarawak.

This denial of access to timber transnational giant Samling began when Henneson was a young man.

It has been sustained by men, women and children from several Penan villages in the area for two decades.

The blockade is simply a small barricade of sticks and bamboo strung across Samling's timber access track.

Each time Samling, known to local villagers as "the company", tries to break down the blockade, the villagers stand behind the sticks and branches, braving hunger and the elements, until Samling backs down.

The villagers have blocked the way of Samling bulldozers with their own frail bodies, as one lone protester did against a line of tanks in Tiananmen Square in the famous television footage from 20 years ago.

A small notice on the barricade, in neat writing, states in Penan and Malay: "Land is Our Life". The notice is flanked by decorative tendrils carved from bamboo.

Police back the company

After half an hour's trek back through virgin forest to his modest house, Henneson recounted part of the long history of threats and inducements from the company.

"The company sent in the Police Field Force when they couldn't get through the blockade," he explained.

"The police set up a camp with tarpaulin tents beside the logging track. They stayed for half a year. They had guns but they couldn't stay for long. We felt sorry for them. They were far from home, living in the middle of the jungle, bitten by mosquitoes and leeches.

"We even gave rice to some of the police. They are human beings after all, like the Penan."

Henneson spoke of his eventual arrest.

"Some angry policemen arrested me for supporting the villagers at the blockade. They punched me in the stomach and slapped my face when I was in the police truck on the way to the police lock-up in Marudi.

"Then in the Marudi lock-up, they tied my hands so that my arms were outstretched like this," Henneson extended his arms horizontally, "and beat me with a stick, again and again.

"I never confessed that I'd done anything wrong. We were only trying to protect our land, for our children and grandchildren. I was released after a few days. I could still walk, but it was painful. I was covered in bruises."

Henneson said that government spokespersons, including Ba'kelalan state assemblyperson Nelson Balang Rining and former Miri Resident Ose Murang, have visited Long Benali to press the villagers to take down the blockade.

According to Henneson, representatives of the Malaysian Timber Certification Council (MTCC), a national body tasked with investigating whether timber is sustainably produced without harming local communities, also accompanied government officials and Samling staff.

"The government and the MTCC people asked us, over and over, to take down the blockade," Henneson said.

"YB Nelson told us: 'You are against the government. You are 'bodoh' (stupid)! You will be left behind. You will be blacklisted. We will not bring projects to you.'

"We replied that we are not against the government. We only want to protect our forest and our drinking water. We welcome the development projects that the government brings. Who wouldn't?" Henneson asked.

Henneson related a visit in late 2007 of Kho Thien Seng, also known as 'Sio'. Henneson said Kho was acting as a Samling agent. Kho flew into Long Benali on a Samling helicopter with an offer of a huge bribe for Henneson.

"He sat here at my kitchen table and offered me RM22,000 if I could get the blockade removed," Henneson said.

"I said it was impossible. I told him the land was for all the generations, not just for this one. He was furious. He punched me hard in the chest.

"After I refused his bribe, Kho went to the rest of the village, telling the others that I had accepted money from him, and that the blockade would be destroyed," Henneson said.

"The other Long Benali villagers were shocked and didn't believe him. They came to my house straight away and asked me.

"I hurried to the field where the Samling helicopter was preparing to take off. I caught Kho before he left and confronted him with the truth. The villagers knew he had lied. After that, he took off in the helicopter."

Still waiting for justice

Kho has been in the limelight for other seedy reasons as well. He has been charged in Miri High Court, for forging the signature of Nick Kelesau, the son of Tua Kampung (village chief) Kelesau Naan of Long Kerong, Baram.

Kelesau disappeared during a routine hunting trip in October last year.

His death raised suspicion of foul play. Samling employees from Long Siut had threatened Long Kerong villagers last July and Samling had shown antipathy towards Long Kerong in the past.

Long Kerong villagers have been staunch opponents of Samling's intrusion into their forests.

Kelesau (photo) had been a plaintiff in a longstanding legal suit, filed in 1998, against Samling's intrusion into Long Kerong's communal forest.

According to Nick, the police investigation into Kelesau's death was cursory. The investigation consisted, in its entirety, of a visit to Long Kerong to collect Kelesau's bones.

The bones had been discovered by the villagers, two hours' walk from Long Kerong, last December. Long Kerong villagers say part of the forearm bones had been damaged. They suspect there may have been a struggle with assailants before their revered leader died.

The police did not conduct any interviews with villagers. Nor did they see fit to visit the site where the remains were found. The police did not pursue any further investigations after the post-mortem examination of the bones was reported as inconclusive.

Nick (right) brought the issue of his father's death to the nation's attention, with reports in Malaysiakini.

Following these news reports, Nick said Kho sought him out. With some foresight, Nick recorded their conversation.

Kho offered Nick a bribe of RM25,000 to disown the police report and Malaysiakini articles regarding Kelesau's suspicious death.

When Nick refused, a letter was sent to Malaysiakini in January 2009 bearing a forgery of Nick's signature. The forged letter stated Nick wanted to "end speculation" that there had been foul play involved in his father's death. [see letter below]

The forgery trial has been postponed twice, since March 2009. Kelesau's original suit against Samling in 1998 has also been left in limbo by the judicial system. The cries from the rural communities that "justice delayed is justice denied" have been ignored.

Meanwhile, Henneson Bujang and other Long Benali villagers continue to defend their land. Long Benali, Long Kerong and other Sarawakian communities refuse to back down despite the intimidating odds stacked against them.

Over a simple meal of vegetables and rice in his kitchen, Henneson gave thanks for the food his family were about to share.

"God, may others receive also the gifts we have received from you," he said.