



The Bakun Dam in Sarawak is the second-highest concrete-walled dam in the world. It will flood vast areas of jungle in a remote part of the state and displace 10,000 indigenous people.

Photo: PAUL MALONE

No rhyme or reason to big dams

The Sarawak Government's enthusiasm for damming rivers appears to prioritise venality over vision, **PAUL MALONE** writes

THE PENAN headman stood motionless, gazing into the jungle treetops, saying nothing and frustrating officials as they anxiously awaited his opinion of the new home-site they had chosen for his people. What did he think of this jungle region on the Koyan River in central Sarawak, about 40km as the crow flies from his old home on the mighty upper Rajang River? Would it be a satisfactory place for his band of 20 families to live when their homes were swallowed up by the flooding of the giant Bakun Dam?

Leaders from the 14 other tribal groups had surveyed their sites and, perhaps reluctantly, given their go-ahead, with a few constructive comments here and there.

But not Kulleh Gau. Finally the officials approached him. What did he think?

In a simple but straightforward way he responded that the Penan families would not like to occupy this area. There was not a single palm tree, an aping or pantu, to supply their staple food, sago.

He should not have needed to, but then he explained that the Penan not only ate rice, as all the

other tribal people did, but more importantly relied on the jungle palms. They hunted, collected fruit, vegetables and rattan in the jungle and set up camps to harvest and process the sago.

The officials politely invited him to have a "thorough" look so that he would be able to brief his people. This time he replied bluntly. He was not only not in favour of the site, he found the whole Asap-Koyan rivers region unacceptable.

But for him, and everyone else, there was no real choice.

Today – 13 years on – the 15 tribal groups are resettled alongside the two rivers. The Rajang River diversion tunnels are now in the process of being blocked and the Bakun Dam – the second-highest concrete-filled dam in the world after the 233m Shuibuya Dam in China – is filling.

In what officials called Operation Exodus, 9639 people – Penan, Kenyah, Kayan, Lahanan and Ukit – were moved 232km by road and river, sometimes pushing and dragging their longboats.

They left longhouses, ancestral grave sites, gardens with abundant food supplies, rice fields, fish from the river and jungle produce

including wild boar, deer and edible plants. The quiet life, protected or cut off by sheer distance and the rapids on the upper Rajang or Balui River, was gone.

As soon as was reasonable, the loggers moved into the dam basin, harvesting all that was commercially available.

While the dam was being built, diversion tunnels were dug to take the massive river, which is 640km long, and at 250km from its mouth still 100m wide and capable of taking 100-person express boats.

Standing above two terrifying whirlpools days before the process of closing these tunnels began, I couldn't help but wonder what would happen to a person caught in the flow. Large tree trunks swirl around and then disappear into the whirlpool. Boats that have lost their moorings further upstream have been swallowed, but thankfully none with people on board.

At the initial inspection of the resettlement site the tribal chiefs could have been forgiven for thinking that their new locations would be similar to their old ones. The Sarawak Services Officer, Liman Numpang, who showed them the

area, says in his written account that it was in the "far interior right into the middle of the jungle". The chiefs saw the Asap and Koyan rivers – albeit much smaller and muddier than the upper Rajang they would leave. And they saw the jungle all around.

But today it is not like that. They now know that the two rivers do not carry big fish like the Rajang. And much more importantly, they also know that the region around their enclave was allocated to logging and palm oil companies (often with the same top ownership). Liman Numpang knew this at the time of the site inspection, saying in his reminiscences of the era that the surrounding five blocks of land were for oil palm and forest plantation.

The companies moved quickly. Today young oil palm trees grow through the scrub of a devastated land. There is no forest for the settlers to roam, no rattan for weaving and no vegetable roots and leaves for collecting. And, of course, that's not to mention the extinction of the animals, trees, flowers and insects of the region.

To say that the headmen were conned would be an understatement. Each family now has a tiny, unsustainable garden block of land and no forest to fall back on.

Kulleh Gau, the Penan headman who surveyed the area and expressed his opposition to the site, has since died. And the new headman of his clan is reluctant to talk.

"What can you people [the media] do for us?" he asks through an interpreter. And I have nothing to promise in reply.

Later I learned that he had previously given an interview with Malaysian TV 2, making some mild criticism along the lines that his people needed help, needed education. On seeing this, Government officials heaved him and demanded to know why he had talked.

He was not going to make the same mistake again.

I wanted to know what his band thought of the relocation. What employment did they have? Could they hunt, or collect provisions from the region?

A member of his Penan Talun band, who did not want to be identified, laughed at the suggestion. Where could they hunt, he asked, sweeping his arm out to the barren logged hills.

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