



Clockwise from left, students travel to school across the Rajang on a boat; logs disappear into the huge whirlpool created by the diversion pipes; a longhouse in the new settlement; a truck takes logs from the resettlement site at Asap; and Penan elder Panah, who says, "We used to take our life from the jungle. But now everything is changed."

Photos: PAUL MALONE

name of the dead. But anthropologists have observed that they talk of the site of the death and that old people can often recite locations going back six generations.

The people are also seeking compensation for trees. Again anthropologists have observed that traditionally Penan had individual recognised claims to particular trees and sago palms.

"We have been cheated by the Government for so long," Panah said through an interpreter. "In the last 15 years we changed our way of life to farming. We used to take our life from the jungle. But now everything is changed. The Government must pay for the sago and everything that lived before."

He also wants free electricity and water for the longhouse, a request which other dislocated people argue is only fair, given their move was to enable the dam's water storage and electricity generation.

The Sarawak Government is currently negotiating with the Malaysian Federal Government to buy the dam, potentially creating a

huge conflict of interest. The family company of the state's Chief Minister, Abdul Taib Mahmud, has an agreement with giant British/Australian mining company, Rio Tinto, to jointly build an aluminium smelter that would be powered by electricity from the hydro scheme. Such a deal would generate a hue and cry in Australia, or any other Western democracy, but in Sarawak it barely seems to rate a mention.

The *Canberra Times* has put questions about this to both the Chief Minister and Rio Tinto but has not received a response from either.

Although there is an election due, the local papers have not featured the conflict and devote their column inches to statements by Government leaders criticising the Opposition.

Websites and blogs have over the years raised many allegations of cronyism and corruption against the Government. Taib's family companies are alleged to have benefited from the dam building work by supplying construction

The elderly, with little to occupy them and give them self-esteem, are lost in the new world and yearn for the old. But the young know no other and are more optimistic about the future.

materials. They are also alleged to have logging concessions and to have benefited from the destruction of the forests through their shipping interests, which transport the timber.

The non-government Sarawak

Report says that profits from the Sarawak ventures have been siphoned off overseas. It says Taib's children are the shareholders and directors of numerous companies controlling residential and commercial buildings in Canada, Australia, Britain and the United States, together worth hundreds of millions of US dollars. The profits from timber, oil and oil palm (much of it grown on land illegally sequestered from the indigenous communities) have gone straight into the pockets of Taib's party's cronies.

The end result of all this is that the once unparalleled tropical rainforests have been denuded, with only a fraction now remaining uncut. Today travelling for some days, 500km up and down the Rajang and 100km on the Baram River, I saw only one kingfisher. Thirty years ago I was enthralled as it seemed there was a kingfisher diving from the overhanging forest virtually every kilometre. Once in a while the Government cannot ignore a catastrophe and last month Sarawak Land Develop-

ment Minister Datuk Seri Dr James Masing blamed loggers who did not follow the rules for the massive, dangerous logjam of debris which he suspected came from work on the Baleh River, one of the Rejang's tributaries.

But the incident should have been no surprise. A recent visitor to the upper Baleh and its tributaries said many were "dead" rivers with trees felled along the banks and countless smaller logs strewn on them. The rivers are like "dead" tree graveyards, he explained.

Today the tribal peoples who relied on the forests for their livelihood have lost their heritage and their independence.

There is also the question of what is going to be done with the 2400 MW of electricity to be generated by the dam. At one time the power – which is far in excess of Sarawak's needs – was to be transmitted to peninsular Malaysia via an undersea cable.

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