

Fighting an uphill battle for

In part two of a special report into the fate of the Sarawak region of Borneo, **PAUL MALONE** talks to the mining companies who harvest the great forests and examines the impact on the tribes who continue to fight for their lands

THE TREES reach up to greet you as you fly into the Long Lellang settlement in the upper reaches of the Baram River in central Borneo, just a few degrees north of the equator.

Giant 60m dipterocarps perhaps 300 years old tower above the broad canopy which stands 40m above the ground.

In the foothills beyond the airstrip, locals say a black clouded leopard stalks its prey, one of many rare creatures still roaming the jungle.

The only way into, or out of, this settlement is by air, long-boat, or on foot through the mountains. A few cars lie trapped in the village, the legacy of a now-abandoned logging road that once cut into the region.

But if the major logging company Samling gets its way, and can overcome opposition from the nomadic Penan, a new road will soon open up the area to development.

The forests of Sarawak have been the centre of a land battle for the past 30 years. The key issue is the non-recognition of Penan land rights.

A High Court claim for the land was lodged in 1998 but in October 2002 another indigenous tribe, the Kenyah, made claims to the land and the matter was stayed, awaiting a determination from the Native Court.

With no hearing and no determination, logging continues on Penan-claimed land.

Samling's chief operating officer James Ho says his company is seeking to persuade the Penan of the benefits of development.

"We're very patient. We try to convince them that it is for their own good, for the development of the area," the executive, who is keen to tell me that he is a Christian and was educated by the Christian Brothers, says.

The company has provided millions of dollars worth of aid to the Penan in building materials, timber, zinc roofing, water pipes, educational assistance and diesel fuel.

Coffee plantation projects are being trialled as a possible source of cash income for native people. A brilliant mini-hydro electric plant, built with the company's assistance and the labour of the locals at the village of Long Main, provides free electricity, enabling lighting, washing machines, refrigeration and satellite television.

It is no accident that at this most prosperous Penan settlement villagers are the most sympathetic to Samling, although none would express a view favouring logging. Rather, they accept the inevitable, saying that the Government wants it.

Christmas comes twice a year to the Penan, Ho says, referring to payments the company makes to them.

But there are allegations of attempts to buy off individual headmen. Could the Samling payments be seen as corrupt?

"I think this has been twisted," Ho says. "Helping people does not mean corruption. Corruption is something else. This is assisting



them, helping them to have better lives. How can this be called corruption?"

Ho says the Penan are bullying Samling and defends the company's policy of selective logging on a 25 coupe system — where the first coupe is logged in the first year, with the company moving on until its 25 year lease is exhausted.

Before starting, the company must submit plans for approval to the Government. It must then abide by minimum diameter log rules for various trees. No fruit trees are cut, Ho says.

Views differ on the impact of selective logging.

Professor Jeffrey A. Sayer, World Wildlife Fund senior associate, says the general reaction of the conservation community is outright opposition but the reality is much more complex. Sometimes just a few trees per hectare are removed and the forests retain much of their original biodiversity.

But director of the environmental management and development program at the Australian National University, Luca Tacconi, says in selective logging companies tend to harvest a small number of species. Over time this changes the composition of the forest itself.

He also observes that a 25-year cycle is very short and after that time there will be a much lower harvestable volume available.

A Penan volunteer with the Wildlife Conservation Service, John Lajo, says areas have less wildlife after they have been selectively logged. And the authoritative *Field Guide to the Mammals of Borneo* says selective logging not only removes the largest trees but kills or damages many smaller trees in the process. The logging roads open the forest and provide easy access to all and sundry, inviting shooters from around the region to hunt the wildlife.

Ho says, however, that when Samling cuts down a large tree and opens the canopy, 13,000 seedlings will regenerate per hectare in the first year.

In the early 1970s, about 70 per cent of Sarawak's 12.3 million hectares was relatively undisturbed forest. The Sarawak Government's plans for oil palm, eucalypt and acacia plantations and selective logging will see only one million hectares or 8 per cent left untouched.

The Government does not require any environmental impact statement for the logging of undisturbed areas.

The claim by logging companies that they are engaged in sustainable harvesting raises the obvious question: if so, why do they keep entering new pristine areas?



The demand to enter new areas suggests logging companies are not engaged in sustainable harvesting.

Samling points to its 25-year coupe system, but as it has been in the business for 30 years, why is it still moving into new jungle regions?

The company responds that its concession areas are assigned by the authorities.

"As a responsible forestry company, we abide by rules of selective harvesting to ensure the long-term sustainability of the forest so that we can return to previously logged areas after a prescribed cutting cycle."

But the demand to enter new areas suggests the logging companies — other players include the secretive Shin Yang company — are not engaged in sustainable harvesting. Instead, they are "mining" the forest, taking a resource that will never return.

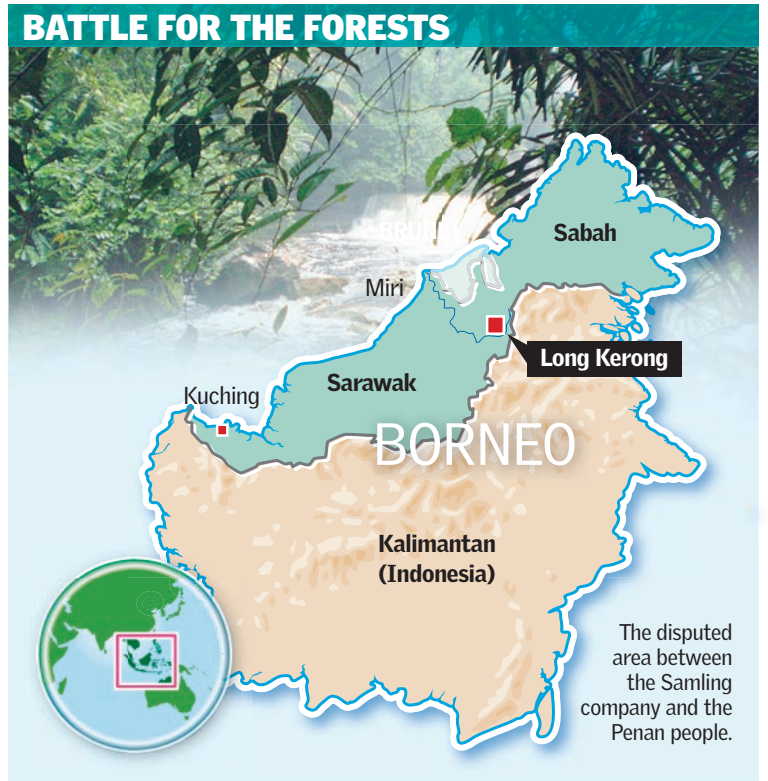
While much world attention has been given to the plight of the orangutan, the Penan's battle, once championed by Al Gore and Prince Charles, has slipped into the background. The Penan's current logging road blockade stands at Long Benalih on a road Samling plans to build to the regional airport-serviced village of Long Lellang.

When I arrived at the tiny settlement of Long Benalih, most of the community leaders were off gathering gaharu, the valuable wood used as incense in China and the Middle East.

But one elder, Henneson Bujang, was there to tell me he and the community would maintain the blockade and risk arrest. (He has been arrested and jailed previously but says he is not frightened).

"This is my place, our life. If there is no forest there is no Penan," he said.

Henneson says although his community is no longer nomadic they want the forest to remain. He believes that if the region is left untouched the community can get income from tourists, guiding them to the nearby stunning



Sela'an waterfall or on trekking or wildlife expeditions.

The flimsy, unmanned blockade is a two-hour trek up a very slippery, muddy track from the village.

Ho says Samling will not breach or remove any blockade.

"It can be a string, a piece of log, a sign. We never remove them."

But the company does not have to. Over the years, the government authorities, police and army have cleared the way. And Samling is of course happy to cooperate with such authorities, providing occasional accommodation for Sarawak Forestry Corporation employees monitoring the blockade.

There are only 10,000 Penan in total, of whom only about 300 to 400 are truly nomadic, but

hundreds have been arrested at blockades since the 1980s.

The Sarawak Government has taken an uncompromising stance in its response to the Penan's High Court action, even demanding that they prove they are natives of Sarawak and Malaysian citizens.

This is despite numerous records of the Penan in the areas they claim well before the formation of Malaysia.

It is not easy for individuals to prove their antecedents. Many of the older Penan people do not have birth certificates and the authorities do not always make it easy for the Penan to get identity cards.

The babies are rarely born in hospitals where doctors can sign the paperwork, and elderly Penan cannot find someone even older to