



AMAT: All 28 bridges have collapsed.



SINAMAREN: A cylinder of gas now costs RM180.



HERMAN: Confident logging company will maintain new track.



LAWAI: Introduce plantation projects for long term benefit

Road vital to our livelihood, say isolated villagers

KUCHING: Residents of Long Lellang, Ulu Baram in Miri Division, are facing problems of inaccessibility in their delivery of daily supplies.

There was once a logging track but it has become unusable since two years ago due to neglect.

Prices of essential goods, including fuel, have risen in recent years. And the villagers are hoping a road linking the village to Miri can be built.

The State government heard their pleas and asked a logging company in the Division to open a logging track to connect the outer-link road for northern Sarawak, crossing 14 villages with a population of 1,444 people of whom 127 are Kelabits and the rest Penans.

However, this new project has met with protests from a small group of Penans in the area and has stalled.

The Kelabits and Penans who support the project have been waiting, compromising and persuading this group of Penans to accept the project over the last four years.

At a recent dialogue, Ketua Kaum or community leader for Long Lellang A, Amat Aran said the old logging track could not be used anymore because it had not been maintained.

"All 28 bridges crossing the Sungai Patah tributaries along the old logging road have collapsed. They have been totally unusable since two years ago."

Amat, 71, said the new proposed logging track was a shorter route, adding: "The journey along the old track takes eight to 10 hours but this new one will save three hours of travelling time."

"A group of Penans have, however, protested the construction of new track and put up a blockade that hinders the delivery of daily supplies."

He explained that Long Lellang residents were either too old or too young and therefore had no choice but to hire the Penans from Long Benalih to carry fuel, gas cylinders and food supplies to their villages from the blockade.

"One gallon of fuel used to cost RM16 but now RM35 because of the charges we have to pay. Everything is so expensive these days and we can't afford the high living costs over the long term," he pointed out.

He said he and other community leaders had talked with the protesters on the need to have the new track but seemingly to no avail.

"Life is really tough here. There's no road... on top of insufficient fights to our area. There are also not enough supplies and the living costs are high," he lamented.

"We can't watch TV because there's no power and we are running short on fuel for the generator."

He said the logging company, has been asked to open the logging track, and the villagers could have just

dismantled the blockade but did not do so out of respect to others.

Housewife Sinamaren Ribuh, 68, from Long Lellang said: "I have a cooking stove but can't use it because it has run out of gas. A cylinder costs RM180 and I can't afford it anymore."

"It used to cost RM50 only but since the logging road could not be used a few years ago, other daily needs have become very expensive in this area. We badly need a road."

Siammaren, a Kelabit, said she had to cook with firewood now.

A retired teacher Herman Bail Iboh said he would buy supplies to last for three months each time he flew to Miri or Marudi, spending about RM2,000 per trip.

"I used to spend less than that when I chartered a vehicle plying the old logging road."

He was confident that the logging company (entrusted with opening the logging track) would continue to carry out maintenance once it was opened.

He believed that some of the Penans were very much influenced and misled by international NGOs.

Concurring with Herman, retired teacher George Pusu asserted that claims posted in Internet by international NGOs were baseless.

He said the Kelabits of Long Lellang had been living and would continue to live side-by-side with the Penans for years despite differences in opinion on the new

logging track.

"But we need a road for better accessibility to the area for the benefit of the whole community, including the Penans who protest the project," he pointed out.

There is an air strip, government clinic and primary school at Long Lellang.

George disclosed that the Long Lellang community would be launching a website to better explain the whole issue so that international NGOs and timber stakeholders would not be misled or blow the blockade issue out of proportion.

A 65-year-old Penan community leader from Long Main Jalong Keheng, said his village supported the opening of the new logging track because it would benefit everyone in the area.

"We want the road because we're facing similar problems as our Kelabit counterparts," he said.

He pointed out that they hardly had any income and yet daily needs cost so much.

"We also need the road so that assistance from the government can easily reach us," he said.

A Long Lellang elder Lawai Adun Maren Lugun, 77, suggested projects be introduced to benefit the Ulu Baram communities in the long term such as oil palm plantation.

"Let them work at plantations instead of giving them aid. The Orang Ulu here need jobs," he said.

Half of Penans near Long Lellang without ICs

KUCHING: Government departments - especially those in charge of National Registration, Health and Agriculture - have been urged to visit the Penan community near Long Lellang in Ulu Baram.

Seluma Jalong, a rural volunteer in the Chief Minister's Department taking care of the Penan community in the area, said the community were in need of socio-economic attention.

"Half the Penans in the area are still without identity cards and the children are in serious need of dental care. We are also looking forward to planting cash crops for the community's consumption and perhaps sell some to nearby villages to raise some money for the Penans," she told reporters who visited Long Lellang recently.

She added: "As a rural volunteer, it's my job to bring my community into mainstream development and teach them that changes are part of life."

Between 10 and 20 years ago, the Ulu Baram Penans gave up their nomadic lifestyle to settle in seven villages in the Long Lellang area such as Long Main, Long Kepang, Long Benalih, Long Kelian, Pengaran Iman, Long Keramoh and Long Sabai. There are 511 people living in these villages.

Seluma, from Long Main, said officers from the National Registration Department came to Long Lellang 10 years ago but their one-day visit was insufficient as many Penans could not make it in time to meet them. "Five years ago, the Department was supposed to have come again but the trip was cancelled due to lack of fund."

She pointed out that the Penans could not afford to travel to Marudi to have their identity cards done and thus, had to rely on the officers coming over.

She said the community also lacked vegetable seeds, fruit seedlings and know-how on agriculture and hoped Agriculture Department would help address this problem.

Citing an example, Seluma said



SELUMA: The Penan community needs socio-economic attention.

her village, supposed to be the most advanced, needed fish fry for the ponds while the padi fields were overgrown with weeds.

"Some of the houses are too old and need rebuilding while the mini hydro dam needs upgrading."

Other villages needed bridges so that the children could cross rivers safely on the way to school, she said, adding that Long Sabai was the furthest Penan village from Long Lellang, a 24 km or eight-hour walk.

Seluma also called for more medical attention to be given to the children as some had been infected with scabies and lice. "We believe the children got the infections from school because none of the children in villages have them... only those in school," she said.

Seluma said she had to use "tuba" root, a type of poison, to heal her daughter's scabies.

Although villagers can obtain medicine from the Long Lellang Health Clinic or their respective village health representatives, these were often insufficient to last more than three days.

Besides, Seluma added, several Penans completed Form Five and Six last year but had yet to find any jobs or offered scholarships to further their studies. She believed the Penan's welfare would be better taken care of if there was a road from Long Lellang from Miri.