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For Environmental Justice

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PRESS STATEMENT

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**International Day of World's Indigenous Peoples 2018:
Transparency on oil palm plantation project for Iban communities in Marudi**

In conjunction with the International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples today, Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM) wishes to express our concern on the proposal to develop an oil palm plantation project in Marudi, Baram, which will affect the native customary rights (NCR) of at least 20 Iban villages. The affected customary territories not only include some forested areas, they also contain numerous productive smallholding farms, which are important sources of income and food for the communities.

The affected villagers have already sent a letter dated February 5, 2018, with over 30 signatories, to the Chief Minister of Sarawak, the Sarawak Land Custody and Development Authority (LCDA) and the Sarawak Ministry of Modernisation of Agriculture, Native Land and Regional Development, to protest against the project. However until today, they have yet to receive any response from the state authorities.

A few years ago, a series of briefings were conducted by state government agencies for the villagers around Marudi on a proposed oil palm plantation project based on the *konsep baru* model. However, this proposal was widely rejected by the affected villagers. There was also a map that had been obtained by a village, showing five NCR development zones around Marudi. Currently, according to the communities, they are not certain on the current status of this *konsep baru* project proposal.

However since last year, the Marudi villagers began to be visited by parties claiming to have received the licence to develop an oil palm plantation on the communities' NCR territories. They also reported on the development of a nursery and attempts to construct an access road to the project site. Today, there are two blockades that have been erected by the villages to halt the construction of the said access road.

Therefore, we wish to appeal to the Sarawak state government to immediately disclose the actual status of this oil palm plantation licence in Marudi. We are also unclear if there is more than one licence that has been issued in the area. The communities have been kept in the dark for far too long, without being given the relevant information on the project. Among others, the affected villages are in need of detailed information on the project licence status and number, names of the project proponent and their contractors, as well as the map showing the boundaries and size of the project. A comprehensive and transparent consultation process must also be conducted for the affected communities.

This oil palm plantation project will certainly further pollute the Baram river system, which is also the source of clean water for the Marudi township and the villages surrounding it. Even today, many villages surrounding Marudi are no longer able to use the river as their source of potable water. In fact, many villages currently have been forced to rely on rainwater. Since the onset of the dry spell in March, more than a thousand residents of these villages have had to face extreme hardship. We have already issued out a statement on this matter in July.

We urge the federal and state governments to give their focused attention on the problems associated with the development of large scale oil palm and pulp and paper monoculture plantations in Sarawak, which encroach upon indigenous customary territories, destroy forests and productive indigenous smallholding farms and cause a host of adverse impacts on the environment, including severe river pollution.

We believe that since the late 1990s, the size of such monoculture plantation licences in Sarawak has reached more than 3 million hectares, or one fourth of the total land area of Sarawak. According to the website of the Forest Department of Sarawak, the Licence for Planted Forests (LPF) permits alone have been issued over 2.8 million hectares. The LPF permit, which is under the authority of the Forest Department of Sarawak, implies that most of the areas under the permit were in fact originally forested. Meanwhile, other monoculture plantation licences are under the authority of the Sarawak Department of Lands and Surveys, including those that involve implementation agencies such as the LCDA.

The new Malaysia can no longer close its eyes on the violations of human rights that are perpetrated against its indigenous peoples, the continuous land grabbing of their customary territories, the destruction of forests and environmental pollution. On this historic date, we wish to call upon the federal and state governments to demonstrate governance transparency. Detailed information on the project must be publicly disclosed. The rights of the affected communities to defend their customary territories from being encroached upon by this project must be respected.

S.M. Mohamed Idris
President
Sahabat Alam Malaysia

Notes on two sets of photos:

- (i) Blockade that was built by the community of Rumah Beliang on July 17 to halt the construction of an access road to the project site.
- (ii) Meeting attended by more than 20 community representatives in Marudi on July 18 to discuss on the proposed project.