



**Sahabat Alam Malaysia**  
**Friends of the Earth Malaysia**  
For Environmental Justice

1, Jalan Joki, 11400 Penang, Malaysia  
Tel No: +604 827 6930  
Fax No: +604 827 6932  
Email: foemalaysia@gmail.com  
<https://www.foe-malaysia.org>

**Press Statement**

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**Stop the encroachment on Rumah Labang native customary territory**

Recently, Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM) received a complaint from the Iban community of Rumah Labang in Nanga Seridan, Tinjar, Sarawak pertaining to the operations of an oil palm plantation project that have encroached on their native customary rights (NCR) territory.

The community had actually been informed about the proposed project since before the year 2018. Right from the very beginning, they have expressed their objections against this project through a series of discussions with representatives of the project proponent and the state authorities. Later on, when the movement control order was enforced due to the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic, no encroachment occurred.

Unfortunately however, we have now been informed by the community that the project proponent had already entered into Rumah Labang customary territory in early February this year, without any prior consultation or knowledge of the community. The encroachment was reportedly carried out in order to construct the roads and drainage for the project. A police report was subsequently lodged by a community member about this incident.

According to the community, they suffered severe losses as a result of the operations, as their property and crops, including their rubber trees, had been destroyed.

The community stated that all this while, they had been participating in a series of dialogues with the project proponent, including those organised by the Beluru District Office in Bakong, in the presence of other state government agencies.

In fact, we understand that this issue was also discussed during a dialogue with the community and the Marudi state assembly person, Datuk Dr. Penguang Manggil, on 21 December, 2018, in Miri. As a result of the dialogue, Datuk Dr. Penguang himself stated on his Facebook account on March 17, 2021, that the project proponent had agreed to remove the NCR territories of Rumah Labang and Long Sepiling from the project area.

In addition, at the 18th DUN meeting held in November 2018, the state government, through the answers given to the questions posed by the Kidurong state assembly person, guaranteed that if it is found that there are valid native customary rights (NCR) within the project area, such areas will be excluded from being issued with any permanent title deed.

However, it seems that all these efforts do not provide sufficient protection for the Rumah Labang NCR territory.

Rumah Labang residents have been living in their NCR territory since 1954. They have various evidence of their rights. These include farms owned by the community, rubber smallholding certificates, birth certificates of community members going as early as the 1950s and old cemeteries.

Therefore, we do not understand how the encroachment on the Rumah Labang NCR territory could have happened. This encroachment has clearly violated their NCR, which are recognised by the Sarawak Land Code 1958. The NCR are also considered as a right to property, which is protected by the Federal Constitution.

SAM is paying close attention to the protection of the Rumah Labang NCR territory. Therefore, we call on the Sarawak state government to take transparent and fair actions to ensure that the activities of this plantation project will no longer encroach on an area of 275 hectares located in Lot 12 of the Bok Land District, which is a part of the Rumah Labang NCR territory.

Specifically, we would like to request for the Sarawak Department of Lands and Surveys as well as the Sarawak Land Custody and Development Authority (LCDA) to provide further explanations on actions that they will be taking in halting future encroachment on the Rumah Labang NCR territory by this project.

**Meenakshi Raman**  
**President**  
**Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM)**