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Certifiers issue ultimatum to Malaysian logging giant Samling: forest certification will be revoked unless company resolves conflict with Penan

Important campaign success for blockading Penan communities

The Malaysian Timber Certification Council (MTCC) has threatened Samling, the Sarawak-based timber giant, to revoke its certification of 56'000 hectares of tropical forest in the Upper Baram region of Sarawak unless the company resolves a land conflict with blockading Penan communities by November 2007. According to an Associated Press (AP) article published today in various Malaysian media, MTCC's Chief Executive Officer Chew Lye Teng asked Samling to negotiate with the Penan community who defends one of Sarawak's last remaining tracts of primeval rainforest against the loggers. „If Samling fails to resolve the issue by November the council could revoke the company's certificate of sustainable management“, AP quotes Chew. According to the CEO, the council's order was based on a survey earlier this year by an independent inspection company.

The Bruno Manser Fund welcomes MTCC's overdue clarification which has been made after two years of intensive campaigning by the Penan communities and supporting Malaysian and international NGOs. „MTCC has realized that its loss of credibility outweighs the gains from the cooperation with Samling“, BMF director Dr. Lukas Straumann said. „We now expect Samling to immediately stop the road construction to Long Lellang and cease all logging activities both in the contested Penan areas and the few remaining primeval forests of Sarawak.“

The MTCC decision is an important campaign victory for Penan headman Saun Bujang of Long Benali whose community has maintained the blockade of a Samling logging road for more than three years. In July 2006, the blockade was dismantled by local police units and has since then several times been reerected by the Penan. In 2007, Malaysian security forces set up a permanent camp close to the blockade site within the MTCC-certified Samling concession. The local communities reported several incidents of intimidation by the police officers such as shots in the air and verbal threats. According to the community, the Samling road construction has almost reached their village in the last weeks.

MTCC's ultimatum is the second major blow for Samling after the company lost its FSC certification of 570'000 hectares of tropical forest in Guyana in January 2007. It means a loss of face not only to the Malaysian multinational but also to its supporting banks Credit Suisse, HSBC and Macquarie Securities who sponsored the Samling public listing in Hong Kong earlier this year. HSBC had supported Samling in violation of its own published forest policy. Credit Suisse had reassured worried customers with letters saying that Samling operations were perfectly sustainable. Questioned by Swiss national television, Credit Suisse Chief Risk Officer Tobias Guldemann personally defended the Samling transaction as compatible with the bank's sustainability policies.

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