

# Protecting forests and water supply

Residents from the Bentong district of Pahang are protesting logging because it will affect their water supply.

By WONG LI ZA  
star2green@thestar.com.my

FROM Cameron Highlands and Penang Hill to Gua Musang in Kelantan, deforestation around the country is jeopardising our environment.

In late September, orang asli (indigenous people) made headlines by forming blockades at the Balah Forest Reserve, 60km away from Gua Musang, to stop loggers from entering.

The latest to be added to this list is Bentong, in the western part of Pahang. Last week, over 100 residents from the Pelangai sub-district (mukim) there, got together to protest the deforestation at the Sungai Gapoi Forest. This area is a crucial water catchment area for the Sungai Gapoi water treatment plant in Karak, Pahang, which serves over 5,000 people in Pelangai.

A source revealed that about 400ha of land had been cleared, with plans supposedly in place to clear another 2,800ha, potentially stretching to another nearby forest reserve called Lentang.

Residents said no official signboards have been seen, but logging roads have been cleared right up to almost 600m above sea level.

Since the protest began, the loggers have left the area, leaving behind two bulldozers at Kampung Orang Asli Ulu Semei, a village near where the logging roads begin.

Hihang Atong, 52, Village Development and Security Committee chairperson for that village, recalled that they first noticed the land clearing activities in early September. The villagers were told the land was being cleared to convert into plantations.

"When they cut down the forests, our water source will be polluted and our livelihoods will also be affected," he said.

"As orang asli, we make a living by collecting forest products like *gaharu*, *damar* (both are valuable tree resins) and *attap* (roof thatch)," Hihang explained at a press conference held in Kampung Shafie in Bentong last week.

At the same press conference, Lee Ah Kow, 70, former chief of nearby Kampung Mancis, said there are five tributaries that supply water to the Sungai Gapoi treatment plant.

"We are not against development. But if people clear the forest here, our water source will be affected. We hope the Government will stop the logging activities and not touch the water catchment area," said Lee, who has lived in Mancis for 67 years.

Lee has taken photos of the deforestation activities and sent them to authorities but no explanation had been given.

He also stated his belief that there are five to six different log-

ging companies involved.

"Please do not jeopardise our water supply. If it rains, the water will be like *teh tarik* (brown milk tea). We strongly oppose the deforestation of the water catchment area upstream of the water treatment plant," affirmed Lee.

Also present at the press conference was Kuantan Member of Parliament Fuziah Salleh.

"Environmental issues are close to my heart. Pahang faces many problems with the environment, such as the bauxite issue. In the recent Budget Speech, our Prime Minister stressed the need to protect our water catchment areas. However, our current laws do not adequately protect the environment," she said.

"The laws state that (logging activities) involving less than 250ha do not require an EIA (Environmental Impact Assessment). Therefore, projects smaller than that size are approved. But when we combine these parcels, they become a huge piece of land. That is the loophole in the law right now," she clarified.

## Floods and drought

Association for the Protection of the Natural Heritage of Malaysia (Peka) president, Datuk Shariffa Sabrina Syed Akil, added that it is clear the residents are worried about their source of water.

"Regardless of whether the (logging) licenses have been given or not, we urge the Government to stop such activities because we have already lost a lot of our forests and water sources.

"Our Prime Minister has said we need to protect our water catchment areas. We ask the State Governments to respect what the PM has said," she underlined.

She added that the general modus operandi of logging companies is to first start clearing in the middle of a jungle, to avoid visibility.

"We need at least 50% of our forests in the country, otherwise we will face national disasters like floods, droughts, haze and, most importantly, problems with our water resources. We are against the clearing of our forest reserves.

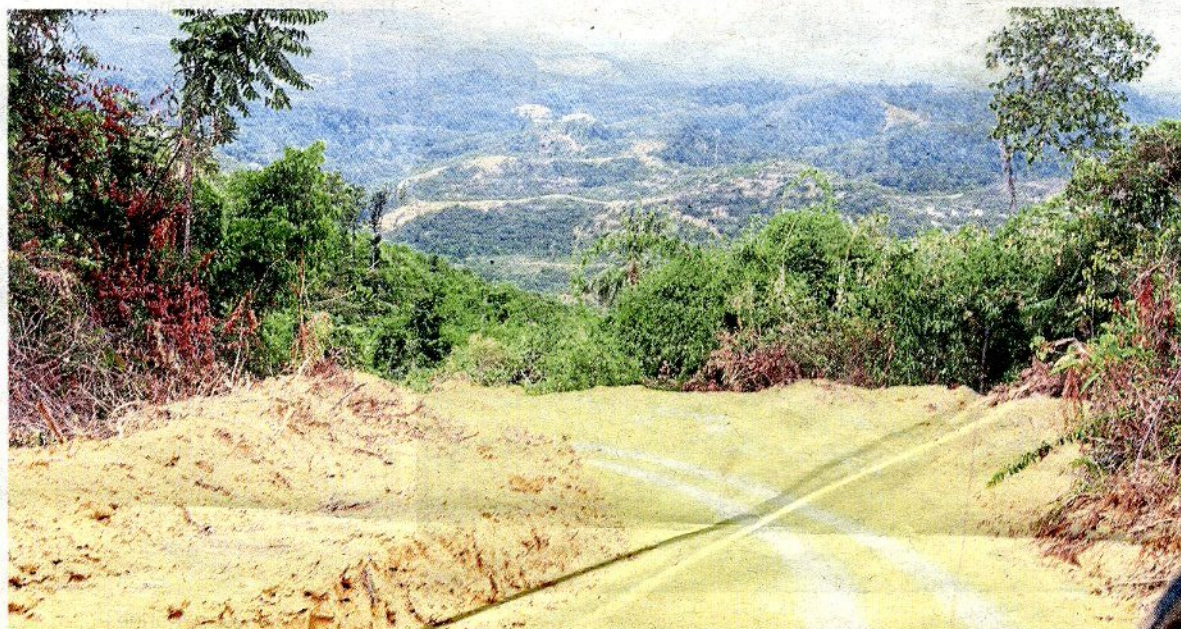
"I urge that no more logging licenses be issued. Google Earth satellite images show we only have 18% of forests left (in the Peninsular), which is not enough to support our needs," Sabrina noted.

Wong Tack, chairperson of environmental NGO *Himpunan Hijau*, urged that the Government protect the country's natural resources for future generations.

"The forests here are important not just for the people living in this area but also people in Kuala Lumpur. It's not a localised prob-



Residents from the Pelangai sub-district in Bentong protesting the logging at the Sungai Gapoi Forest. — Photos: LOW LAY PHON/The Star.



The logging road that starts from Kampung Orang Asli Ulu Semei in Bentong, Pahang, which has been cleared for a proposed Ladang Rakyat project.

**When they cut down the forests, our water source and our livelihoods will be affected.**

Hihang Atong



lem, but one that affects the whole country," he said, urging residents to unite and work together to oppose such logging activities.

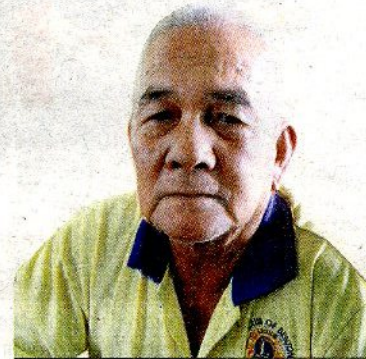
Pahang Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Adnan Yaakob spoke to the media to clarify this issue last Thursday.

He said that in efforts to develop and "give more opportunity" to residents of Pelangai sub-district (including the orang asli), the Government had agreed to implement two projects.

"The first project is an orang asli group replanting project in Ulu

**If it rains, the water will be like *teh tarik*.**

Lee Ah Kow



Semei where 1,000 acres (400ha) will be developed by Risdan (Rubber Industry Smallholders Development Authority) and Jakoa (Department of Orang Asli Development) for rubber and oil palm," said Adnan, with another 120ha possibly being added later.

The second project, he said, is a Ladang Rakyat (People's Plantation) project for the orang asli in Semei, the Chinese population in Mancis, and the Malay population in Ulu Semei and Simpang Pelangai.

This is almost 400ha in size and located to the west and north of the first project. The plan is to parcel out between 1.5ha and 2.5ha (four and six acres) each to 150 to 230 families.

"This second project has not started and that's where the protest is," he said.

Adnan explained that contractors have been given permission to take out timber in order to create plantations and thus, have created roads to do so.

"From our checks, we also found that there has been some illegal development there," he said, later adding that those involved will face "enforcement action".

Following a discussion with various authorities, Adnan said the current decision is that the orang asli group replanting project will go ahead as planned. However, the proposed extra land to be added to the first project, as well as the Ladang Rakyat project, will be put on hold pending further evaluation.

"We will see if these projects affect the environment. We will ensure that such works will not affect the water catchment area nor the water supply to the treatment plant, which provides water to residents in Telamong and also Mancis," he said.

"If there are negative environmental effects and the water in Sungai Gapoi is at risk, we will cancel the projects."