

Narratives of Involuntary Migrants: The Case of the Penan Talun¹

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Introduction

Between 1998 and 1999 15 longhouse communities with a population of slightly more than 9000 people gave up a way of life in the Balui valley in the Belaga District of the Malaysian state of Sarawak for the Bakun Dam Development. The 15 longhouse communities comprise five ethnic groups: Kayan with 8 longhouses, Kenyah 4, Lahanan 1, Buket 1, and Penan 1. They were resettled between 1998 and 1999 along Sungai Asap, a small river that flows into the Koyan, which in turn flows into the Belaga River (see Map). The Penan settlement mentioned above, affected by the Bakun Dam is the Penan Talun of Long Belangan. In 1995 the Penan Talun comprised 23 families with a population of 114 people.² Today, the families have increased to 27 with a population of 237 people. The Penan were reluctant to move, but they did not have a choice. Their reluctance to move is well summed up in the invocation, attached in Appendix I.

This paper highlights a number of issues of concern to the Penan regarding their involuntary migration to the Asap Resettlement, issues somewhat similar to those raised earlier by the other communities affected by the Bakun hydro project, discussed elsewhere.³ These issues, according to the Penan, were raised a number of times at official meetings with officials responsible for the construction of the dam project. In a number of meetings that I have had with them, whether in my capacity as Secretary of the *Majlis Adat Istiadat* to carry out research and discussion on their customary law, or in casual conversations with them over a cup of coffee in the Belaga bazaar or on the gallery of their longhouse, these issues often crept into their conversations over and over again. The narratives of their plight in relation to the Asap Resettlement are presented here for what they are worth, if nothing else, for posterity.

The Penan Talun

There are 15,485 Penan in Sarawak,⁴ and about 3,000 of them live in 18 settlements in Belaga District. The 18 settlements are located in the most interior of the district, in the Linau, Plieran, Danum and Belaga rivers. The Penan Talun is the only group found on the

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² See Henry Chan (1995) "The Penan Talun of Long Belangan: An Ethnographic Report", in Tan Chee Beng (Project Coordinator), *Community Studies in the Bakun Hydroelectric Project Area*. Report No. 3, submitted to the State Planning Unit, Chief Minister's Department, Sarawak.

³ See J. Alexander (2008) "The Lahanan of the Balui (1963-2006)", *Borneo Research Bulletin*, vol. 39:104-27; and J. Rousseau (1996) "The Bakun Hydroelectric Project and Resettlement: A Failure of Planning" in *Power Play: Why Bakun Hydroelectric Project is Damned*, *INSAN* Pp. 91-104.

⁴ "Review of Penan in Sarawak" prepared by the State Planning Unit, in Human Rights Commission of Malaysia Report (2007), *Penan in Ulu Belaga: Right to Land and Socio-Economic Development* p. 249.