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Promoting Social Justice, Human Rights, and Peace

The Last Blockade

(1992: 25 minutes)

Transcribed by Darrell G. Moen

Narrator: In the rainforests of Borneo, a nomadic tribe fights for its survival. Giant logging companies invade the jungle, and a forest growing for ten million years is churned into dust. As the people in the rainforest battle for their lives, World in Action travels to Sarawak's "last blockade." This is a paradise in trouble. In Sarawak, on the northern coast of Borneo, a desperate struggle for survival is being fought. On one side are the logging companies. And on the other side are the tribal peoples.

Unidentified Penan man: [subtitled] If the logging company doesn't stop, we will die.

Unidentified Penan woman: [subtitled] If they come to destroy our blockade, we will fight until we die. We will fight them.

Narrator: As the people fight back, World in Action investigates how politicians and giant corporations profit as the forest is bought and sold.

Dr. B.C.Y. Freezailah (Tropical Timber Organization): This is industry. This is business, and profits have to be made. I think that in some ways we have to regard the tropical forests as a factory, a large, biological factory.

Narrator: This is the biological factory: Sarawak, a Malaysian state on the island of Borneo, just north of the equator. It's the oldest tropical rainforest in the world. There are more kinds of trees here than anywhere else on earth, some 2,500 species that can live for a thousand years. But it takes just minutes to cut one down. The rainforests are home to a quarter of a million (250,000) tribal people.

There are 20 different tribes in Sarawak, each with its own culture and language. These are the Penan, the only nomadic hunter-gatherers outside South America. They have little agriculture and rely on the forests for almost everything. The forest provides their food, their medicines, and even their weapons.

Unidentified Penan man: [subtitled] If they log this land, there won't be any game to keep us alive. People say we should leave the forest so they can cut down the trees. We won't give up our trees. We won't give up our forest.

Narrator: The Malaysian government claim that the forest the Penan depend on are logged in a "sustainable" fashion. In other words, logging does not outstrip the growth of the forest. We wanted to discover for ourselves what was really happening in Sarawak. We asked the Malaysian government for permission to film. They refused, we went anyway. The Baram River, the start of a 200 mile journey through the rainforest.

The scale of the logging became immediately clear; rotting logs line the river banks, rejected by potential buyers. Logging brings Malaysia almost \$2 billion a year. The rivers have become superhighways carrying the logs to sea and onward to foreign ports [mainly in Japan]. Malaysia is the biggest exporter of tropical hardwoods in the world. [Japan is the largest importer of tropical hardwoods in the world]. There are hundreds of logging camps in the forest.

Logging is monitored by the International Tropical Timber Organization (ITTO). Its recent report on Sarawak says the forest won't survive into the next century unless logging is halved. Malaysia has promised a small reduction, but logging will continue at 50% above the survival level. At a village of the Kayan tribe, there were fears for the future despite the money. Concerns, repeated throughout the forests, were expressed by the local schoolteacher.

Local Kayan schoolteacher: The hard labor, like cutting down trees, is given to the local people. That's how they can get some money. But they're only temporary jobs. After the trees are cut down, the jobs are gone. [No more money, no more trees, no more jobs].

Narrator: On logging roads, we drove deeper into the jungle. Our aim was to reach the unique village built by the Penan people. The village is 2,000 feet up on a mountainside. Around it lies pristine rainforest. All logging has stopped here. The reason is the village itself. It sits on a key road built by a major logging company. The village is an act of defiance against both the company and the government. The settlement was built seven months ago. Its sole purpose: to prevent the loggers from moving into surrounding forest. Families from 12 scattered villages take it in turn to come here and join the protest.

Unidentified Penan woman: I don't want the loggers to come as they destroy our land. We are anxious. We are deprived. We are hungry, we are poor, living in this [remaining] forest of ours.

Narrator: Across the logging road, the Penan had built a flimsy barrier, one bulldozer could sweep it aside. The Penan hope they will never have to defend it. Among their major weapons are spears and blowpipes carved from jungle hardwood. They hunt wild pig, deer, bears, and monkeys. The blowpipe darts are slivers of wood dipped in a lethal poison made from tree resin. But the game they kill is getting scarce.

Unidentified Penan man [subtitled]: We can walk for many days when hunting, but find no game because the loggers are near.

Narrator: Sarawak now has the highest rate of logging in the world. Workers earn up to ?1,000 a month, a fortune in Sarawak. Strict regulations govern the size and species of trees to be cut down. But at the camps we visited, we saw no supervision. The loggers cut whatever they wanted.

Interviewer [talking to a Penan man]: The logging companies say they only take out the large, hardwood trees. Is this true?

Unidentified Penan man [subtitled]: The people from the logging firms don't speak the truth when they say that they only cut down the big trees. They destroy the entire forest. That's why we are having such a hard time surviving.

Interviewer (talking to a Penan woman): If the loggers come and start to cut down the trees here, what will this mean for the future of your baby?

Unidentified Penan woman [subtitled]: If they come here to destroy the land, to finish off all the trees, my children will face extreme hardship. My children will die.

Narrator: This is a last-ditch effort to halt the destruction. The Penan know that if they lose here, they may lose forever. The real barricade is the Penan themselves.

Unidentified Penan man [subtitled]: We are prepared to die rather than give up our land. If we are killed, we must be prepared for that. We won't allow them to destroy our motherland. If we die, so be it.

Narrator: For five years, Sarawak's tribal peoples have staged blockades. Each has been swept aside. Now, the Penan say they'll use force - blowpipe poison brings a horrible death.

Unidentified Penan woman [subtitled]: If they come here to kill us, we will defend ourselves and blowpipe them. If they try to pass against our will, we will blowpipe them. Some of them will die here with us. They should just keep away.

Narrator: So far, the loggers have kept their distance. The Penan await their next move. And out at sea, others wait to take the logs away. Tokyo. The heart of the world's strongest economy. Japan's mighty trading houses [Mitsubishi, Mitsui, Sumitomo, etc.] not only buy the lion's share of the world's tropical hardwoods, they finance logging across the Far East. They Kayan natives have come to Tokyo from Sarawak to protest Japan's involvement in the timber trade.

Unidentified Kayan man: Our purpose in coming here is to appeal to the Japanese government to come up with some action to look into the problems that are being faced by Sarawak natives who are suffering from the effects of the logging activities.

Unidentified Penan woman: We now have to drink polluted water and all of our resources from the forest are disappearing. Because we natives depend on the forest for our livelihood, [if the present practices continue, it is only a matter of time before we disappear, too].

Narrator: Overlooked by Mt. Fuji, cargoes of tropical hardwood are unloaded in Tokyo Bay. Japan imports around two million (2,000,000) trees from Asia every year. These logs are from Sarawak. Timber from Southeast Asia is bought by North America and Europe, including Britain. But Japan is far and away the biggest buyer. Although two-thirds of Japan is covered in forest, it does not cut down its own trees. The ones in the floating loggers' stores, are all imported. We asked the Japanese government why.

Sadaaki Numata (Ministry of Foreign Affairs): Our own trees have been preserved on the basis of 2,000 years of history. That has required very serious efforts on our parts. And incidentally, you said 70%, out of which 60% is natural [forest] and 40% man-made. 40% man-made which means we have chopped down our trees and reforested them.

Narrator: Sarawak's trees are fed into Tokyo's sawmills. Tropical hardwood is used for furniture. It makes doors and window frames for the building trade. Or it can be carved into chopsticks. But especially, and incredibly, it's shaved into wafer-thin strips to be turned into plywood. Wood is Japan's traditional building material. Buddhist temples are a celebration of wood, just as making weapons is in Sarawak. Hi-rise buildings also use wood, though with less reverence. Their concrete flanks are shaped by it. In Japan, plywood panels used to mould concrete are always made from tropical hardwoods. Building companies say it gives the concrete a smoother finish, and it's cheap. This building is being constructed by one of Japan's biggest construction firms.

Interviewer: The hardwood mouldings that you use at present, how many times do you use them?

Dr. Kanji San (Obayashi Corp.): Well, we usually use them three times.

Narrator: It's a wasteful business. But this firm is experimenting with a new form of plywood, made from both hardwood and softwood. In the long-term, they have to find an alternative to the plywood made from tropical trees. But only when supplies have run out.

Dr. Kanji San (Obayashi Corp.): So, at that time, we can change to other. more expensive materials. When the tropical hardwoods are all gone.

Narrator: As the forest goes, so do the Penan. Many are being resettled by the logging companies or the government. In the new villages, they have no work or hope. But once, they too tried blocking the logging roads. Two unidentified Penan men in a "new village" [subtitled]: We had blockades about two years ago. People were caught by the police. Two hundred were arrested. Our people have been arrested twice since we started blockades. That's why we don't blockade now, because we were caught by the police.

Narrator: On roads cleared of blockades, the loggers move steadily onwards, bringing their houses with them. 800 people have been arrested for building barricades, hundreds jailed. Blockading these roads is now a criminal offence with a penalty of up to two years imprisonment. But there's a different rule of law when it comes to timber companies ignoring Sarawak's strict logging rules.

Antalai Sawing (Penan Defence Lawyer): Regulation is one thing, enforcement of it is another. And the number of officers responsible to monitor the whole of Sarawak is very small. With the small number of officers such as the forest rangers, it is very difficult for them to police the whole of Sarawak. We very seldom hear of timber companies being prosecuted for violation of logging prohibitions.

Narrator: The industry is controlled right at the top of the political ladder. This is Sarawak's top politician, Abdul Tayid Mamul. As luck would have it, he's also forestry minister, deciding who gets the logging concessions, among them, assorted political allies. This is James Wong, the ebullient minister for the environment. He owns massive logging concessions. When told that deforestation may cut the rainfall, he said, "We get too much rainfall in Sarawak. It stops me from playing golf."

Yoichi Kuroda (Japan Tropical Forest Action Network, JATAN): In Sarawak, a few politicians really get the majority of the benefits from cutting down the forest while sacrificing so many tribal communities.

Narrator: The official ban on our filming meant that we were unable to call on either Mr. Tayid or Mr. Wong to ask them for their comments.

Narrator [in Tokyo]: The Tokyo rush hour. Here, property prices are the highest in the world. As the city grows, the hunger for tropical timber is insatiable. New buildings rise everywhere. This is the new Tokyo City Hall - 5,000 tropical trees were pressed into plywood to mould its walls. The construction industry is a major supporter of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). It's been in power without a break since 1955. The construction industry gave ¥13 million to the LDP's last election fund, with millions more every year. There are no proposals to restrict imports of tropical timber.

Yoichi Kuroda (JATAN): There are 500,000 construction companies in Japan, and they work all over Japan and overseas to get more building projects. So, they're the biggest friends of the LDP.

Interviewer: So, in fact, it's institutionalized corruption that's helping to destroy the rainforests in Sarawak.

Yoichi Kuroda (JATAN): Yes, I believe that's a very accurate explanation.

Narrator: In Sarawak, the connections between Japanese politicians and business count for little as the Penan prepare for battle.

Unidentified Penan man [subtitled]: This is our noose, the noose of the Penan. Whoever tries to arrest us, won't be able to escape. But if they manage to escape, we will blowpipe them. The police handcuff us, but we won't handcuff them. Watch, we do it like this with this noose made from vines. Once caught, they can't escape. If they try to escape, they suffocate. If caught like this, they can't get away.

Narrator: Sarawak is the latest Asian state to be targeted by Japanese traders. The forests of Thailand and the Philippines have already been [destroyed by Japanese timber importers].

Interviewer: When the logs run out in Sarawak, which they probably will within the next ten years, where will you get your timber then?

Kyosuke Mori (Mitsubishi Corp.): Probably we'll seek another source. I don't know precisely where.

Narrator: This garden in Tokyo was laid out by the founder of the Mitsubishi business empire with money made from timber. Today, Mitsubishi is an empire with logging interests across Asia [and throughout the world]. In Sarawak, it not only buys timber, but is part owner of a company which cuts it down.

Masaaki Ozawa (Mitsubishi Corp.): Sarawak is a very big country - two-thirds the size of Japan. I think the Sarawak government knows how to utilize their precious

natural resources. So, Japan should help the Sarawak government with our knowledge to utilize wisely their natural resources.

Narrator: To promote a new "green" image, Mitsubishi has produced a comic book which is given away to schools. The comic tells the story of a keen young employee. He reads criticism of Mitsubishi's logging, and he sets out to discover what is really happening. His researches convince him that the destruction should be blamed on the natives who burn the forests to grow rice. But a fact-finding team from the U.S. Congress disagrees. They found that the impact of commercial logging in Sarawak was much more severe than that of slash-and-burn cultivation. The comic tells how Mitsubishi has funded a ¥800,000 project in Sarawak to see if the rainforest can be regenerated by growing it from scratch. The research is led by Professor Akira Miyawaki, a world-famous botanist.

Prof. Akira Miyawaki: It's said that once a rainforest is ruined, it takes 500 or 1,000 years to recover. We are sure it will be possible for us to make a native ecosystem reappear after 50 or 60 years.

Narrator: But 60 years will be too late for the Penan. And Mitsubishi's money for the experiment will run out in only three years.

bThe restoration project in Sarawak is a big myth. It is merely an experimental-scale project, and they have not applied for permits from the government to actually implement a reforestation project in the field.

Narrator: Mitsubishi says that it only cuts hardwoods by using sustainable methods, but a report by the World Bank says that this is impossible. It states: "No commercial logging of tropical forests has proven to be sustainable from the point of view of the ecosystem."

Interviewer: You produced a comic book about Mitsubishi's environmental ideas. Do you think it gives a balanced view?

Kyosuke Mori (Mitsubishi Corp.): Yes, I think so.

Interviewer: You don't think it's too one-sided? Propaganda?

Kyosuke Mori (Mitsubishi Corp.): No, I don't think so.

Unidentified Penan woman [subtitled]: I have three children. It's difficult to feed them although the family puts all its effort into hunting for food. The land is destroyed. The animals have fled. The sago plants have vanished. We live in terrible hardship.

Prof. Akira Miyawaki: Japan must take responsibility for Southeast Asia. The Asian rainforests or ecosystems have been mainly destroyed by Japan. It's the duty of Japanese scientists to find ways to restore them.

Interviewer: Could it be that the best way to preserve the tropical rainforest is simply to stop chopping it down?

Prof. Akira Miyawaki: Yes.

Narrator: There's a twist in the tale of the trees from Sarawak. The plywood made from them is dumped on Tokyo's municipal rubbish tip. Next, the plywood is shredded into fiber. And finally, this is used as fuel for industrial boilers.

Unidentified Penan men [subtitled]: Many times we hear trees carried off. Many times we hear the trucks. We live on the land of our ancestors.

Narrator: While you've been watching this film, another 75 acres of Sarawak have been logged.