

Malaysian state scales back Borneo dam plans

February 8 2013, by Dan Martin



A boat passes by the Sarawak State Legislative Assembly in Kuching, the capital city of Malaysia's Sarawak state, on February 7, 2013. A state minister said Sarawak gov't will not push ahead with building 12 controversial dams amid anger among local tribes and environmentalists over the plans.

A Malaysian state minister Friday said the government would not push ahead with controversial plans to build 12 dams on Borneo island, after outrage from local tribes and environmentalists.

The proposals sparked fears that the dams would destroy pristine rainforests, endanger wildlife, and displace natives in Sarawak, a Malaysian state crossed by powerful rivers with rich jungle habitats.

"It is not a firm plan to build 12 dams. I don't think we will need that. We will only need four of them," James Masing, Sarawak's state minister of land development, told AFP in an interview.

Masing said the [government](#) was backing off in response to widespread criticism. Protests over the years have seen activists and locals staging blockades of roads into dam areas.

"I'm pleased that this type of thing (protests) takes place. Not all that we do is correct, and this shows we need to refine our plans and think again," he said.

The government mooted plans for the dams as part of an industrial development drive to boost the resource-rich state's backward economy.



Ministry of Land Development Sarawak, James Masing, speaks during an interview at his office in Kuching, the capital city of Malaysia's Sarawak state, on February 8, 2013. Masing said the government would not push ahead with controversial plans to build 12 dams on Borneo island, after outrage from local tribes and environmentalists.

But the now-complete Bakun mega-dam deep in the interior has been dogged for years by allegations of corruption in construction contracts, the flooding of a huge swathe of [rainforest](#) and [displacement](#) of thousands of local tribespeople.

Besides Bakun, another dam at Murum is nearing completion and two others are in the planning stages.

The four dams—at Bakun, Murum, Baleh and Baram—are already expected to put out nearly 6,000 megawatts of power, six times what

Sarawak currently uses, Masing said.

"The protests are becoming more vocal on the ground so (the dam rethink) is a very good development for me," said Peter Kallang, member of a Sarawak tribe and chairman of SAVE Rivers, an NGO that has campaigned against the dams.

However, he said plans for the Baram and Baleh dams should be scrapped as well, noting that the Baram [dam](#) would displace about 20,000 people, compared to about 10,000 at Bakun, and destroy irreplaceable forest.

He said SAVE Rivers last month organised a floating protest along the Baram river that cruised down river for three days and was met with support along the way by local tribespeople.

The Swiss-based jungle-protection group Bruno Manser Fund says about 90 percent of Sarawak's rainforests have been damaged as the state government has opened up virgin forest to loggers and palm-oil plantations.

Critics also allege chief minister Taib Mahmud, who has ruled Sarawak since 1981, has enriched himself and his family through corrupt timber and other dealings, and have called the dams white elephants.

Taib has dismissed the corruption allegations.

Critics of Taib accuse the federal government of failing to act against him because his tight control of Sarawak has kept it a vital ruling coalition stronghold.

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