

Cautious Win for Indigenous Groups in Malaysia as Palm Oil Firm Pauses Forest Clearing

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Asia-Pacific Research, November 13, 2025

[Mongabay](#) 11 November 2025

Region: [South-East Asia](#)

Theme: [Environment](#), [Law and Justice](#)

Indigenous Penan and Kenyah residents in Malaysian Borneo have filed a lawsuit and a complaint with Malaysia's sustainable palm oil certifier, accusing palm oil company Urun Plantations of clearing natural forest within its concession along the Belaga River in violation of its lease and sustainability certification.

Urun Plantations agreed in late October to pause development activities after a palm oil mill suspended buying palm fruit from the plantation.

Satellite imagery and NGO field evidence indicate ongoing deforestation since 2023, while the company says it is only replanting previously developed land and denies breaching certification rules.

The company maintains the project has local support, with the dispute underscoring growing tensions in Malaysia's Sarawak state over palm oil expansion into remaining forests and Indigenous territories.

Indigenous activists in central Sarawak state in Malaysian Borneo have declared victory, at least temporarily, after palm oil firm Urun Plantations agreed to a moratorium on clearing land in a disputed area.

Penan and Kenyah residents of the Long Urun region alleged that the plantation, which is certified as sustainable, was clearing natural forest that should remain standing — even as the plantation company maintains any land clearing was within legal guidelines.



This Sept. 24, 2025 image shows land clearing in the Long Urun area. Image courtesy of The Borneo Project.

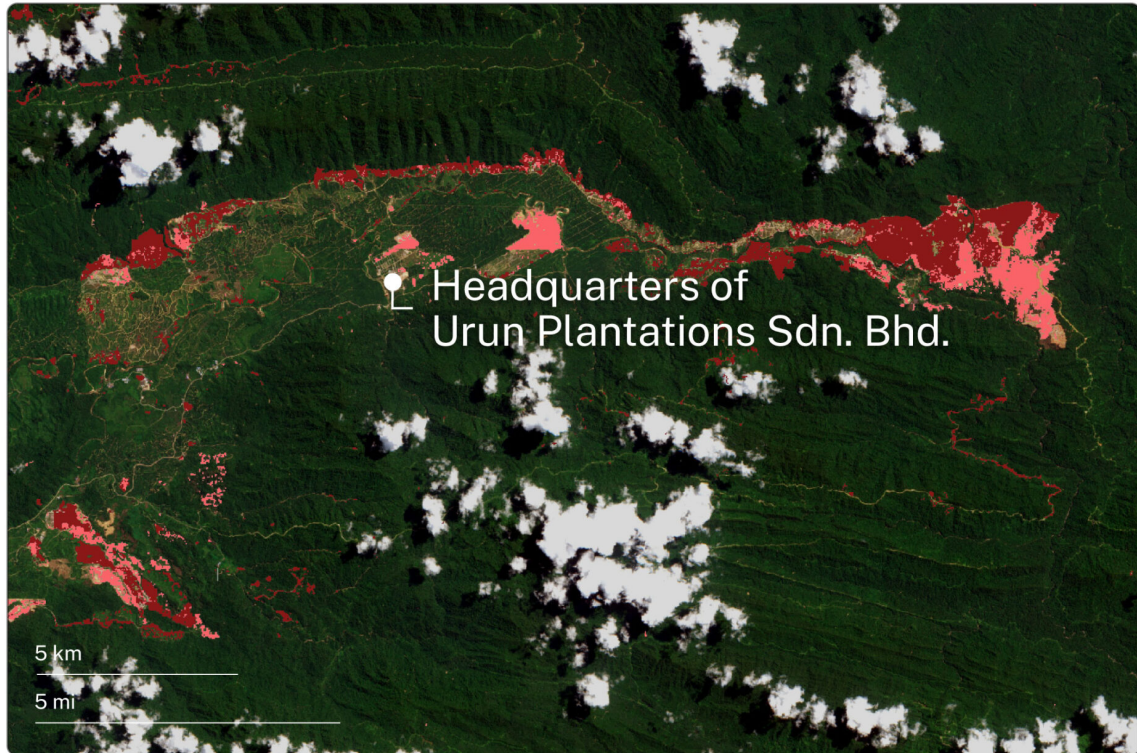
According to a press release from Indigenous rights and environmental protection NGO SAVE Rivers, community leaders reported that the Glenealy/Samling Belaga Mill, the last remaining mill within 50 kilometers (30 miles) still buying palm fruit from Urun Plantations, has suspended sourcing from the plantation.

The moratorium agreement also follows a recent media campaign by SAVE Rivers and environmental advocacy group The Borneo Project, which called on international palm oil producer SD Guthrie (formerly known as Sime Darby Plantation and one of the world's largest producers of certified sustainable palm oil), to suspend purchases from the Glenealy/Samling Belaga Mill.

Deforestation around Urun Plantations in Sarawak



■ Confirmed forest loss alerts in 2025 ■ Tree cover loss from 2022-2024



Sources: Eccocertified, GFW, contains modified Copernicus Sentinel data [2025]

Satellite imagery shows deforestation within Urun Plantations' concession. Image by Emilie Languedoc / Mongabay.

Eileen Clare Ipa, a resident of Long Urun's Uma Pawa village, told Mongabay she was glad the company had stopped cutting trees, but she saw them still planting oil palm and doing maintenance on the cleared area. Ipa said she wants the company to leave that area to return to forest.

“I’m happy to hear that but at the same time I feel the moratorium, it is temporary, it is not permanent, so who knows? Three months, one year later, they could cut [the forest] down again,” she said.

The Origins of the Dispute

Residents say they originally accepted Urun Plantations, a 10,997-hectare (27,174-acre) concession along the Belaga River in Long Urun, in 2007. More recently, however, some have said they believe the company is violating the terms of its lease and sustainability certification, as well as state law.

Ipa said she and other Kenyah and Penan Indigenous locals still used the forest for cultivating fruit trees, fishing and gathering. The company, she said, had cleared her fruit trees, as well as naturally growing species like Bornean ironwood, Bornean camphor and meranti.

“The community is asking for respect and also [for Urun Plantations] to stop chopping forest because Ulu Belaga is the last forest remaining in the area,” she said in a September interview, referring to the forest around the Upper Belaga River.

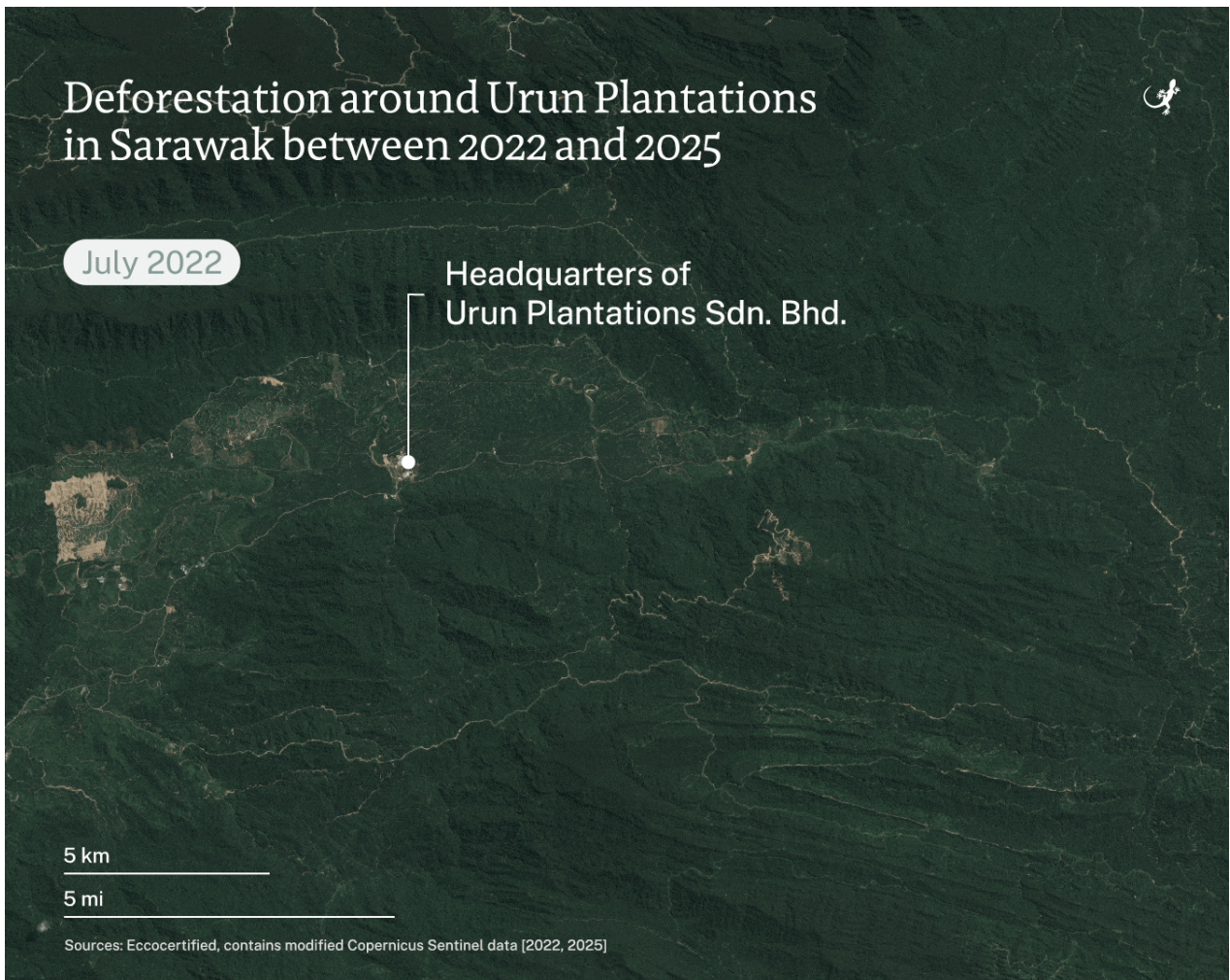


Image by Emilie Languedoc / Mongabay

Satellite imagery from Global Forest Watch shows substantial clearing directly east of Urun Plantations' site headquarters, in an area roughly 3 km (about 2 mi) wide, which increased in 2023 and 2024. [The Borneo Project](#) also shared photos of deforestation in a similar location, east of Urun Plantations' site office.

In a response in early October, prior to the announcement of the moratorium, Urun Plantations told Mongabay that its workers were replanting land that was not natural forest, but rather an area previously developed between 1999 and 2009. In an email, Henry Choo, group general manager for parent company Sin Heng Chan (Malaya) Sdn. Bhd., added the company had investigated the complaint this year, in line with a company policy to investigate all complaints regarding customary land claims. [View Urun Plantations' full response [here](#).]

“In this case, unfortunately, the claims by these individuals after consultation with local leaders are in the company’s view not genuine,” Choo wrote, adding that “the vast majority of Long Urun residents — including fourteen out of the fifteen longhouses — also do not support these individuals’ claims.”

Still, a group of residents including Ipa are pursuing several routes to reach a lasting resolution over the alleged clearing, including sending complaints to Malaysia’s palm oil certification body and filing a lawsuit against the company and local officials.

Fiona McAlpine, communications director and project manager for The Borneo Project, told Mongabay that Urun Plantations appears to have encroached on an area of secondary forest, which would violate the terms of the Malaysia Sustainable Palm Oil certification, and potentially would not be tolerated by palm oil processors and distributors who try to avoid buying from plantations that clear forest or upset local residents.

“Some of what you can see on the satellite [imagery] is where they cleared existing palm oil [trees] that reached their term, and they replanted that area, but they just kept going and kept going into the forested area,” McAlpine said.

Land Use in Long Urun



This September 2025 image shows land clearing in the Bateu Melintang area. Image courtesy of The Borneo Project.

The new clearing site in Long Urun exposes a dispute between residents and the plantation company in interpreting forest types and how companies can use land.

Urun Plantations was founded in 1995 as a state-backed joint venture. By 2008, Kuala Lumpur-based cooling systems conglomerate Sin Heng Chan, a listed company, had acquired the operation. The 10,997-hectare provisional lease area has been [certified under the Malaysia Sustainable Palm Oil \(MSPO\)](#) scheme since 2019, but only 4,062 hectares (10,037 acres) may be cultivated for palm oil, according to the certification document.

Ipa said this latest spate of clearing started in 2022, but mass deforestation began appearing on the Global Forest Watch platform from 2023. Residents held periodic blockades in the Long Urun area starting in late December 2024 through the first half of 2025, and still maintain a small but unguarded barricade post.

Residents from Long Urun also filed a [letter of complaint](#) to the MSPO's dispute resolution board in May, alleging the forest clearing was illegal and occurred without sufficient community input.

MSPO officials did not respond to Mongabay's requests for comment, and as of Nov. 1, residents had not received a response to their complaint.

To qualify as a sustainable producer of oil palm fruit bunches, from which palm oil is made, a company like Urun Plantations must offer affected communities the chance to give their free, prior and informed consent to a plantation project before it begins and [amid any dispute with native customary landholders](#). It must also provide assistance to the community in the form of investments in public services. McAlpine of The Borneo Project said the certification scheme should prevent the company from engaging in new clearing of natural forest. She added she also witnessed tree trimmings and debris floating down the

Belaga River, and tree cover loss near a rock formation called Batu Limbang, during [three field visits between late 2024 and September 2025](#).

The [MSPO's "Principle 5"](#) covers a range of environmental and biodiversity requirements, stating that palm oil companies should work to preserve remaining areas of high conservation value in their territory.

Malaysian Senator Abun Suy Anyit, whose constituency includes this region of Sarawak, also [pointed out on his Facebook page](#) that residents believe the Sarawak palm oil plantation to be in violation of its provisional [lease](#) issued in 1997. That lease gave the company a 10-year grace period to clear forest on its 10,997 hectares up until 2007, after which it could no longer legally clear new land for plantations.

Choo, however, reiterated that the forest area cleared was neither primary nor natural forest, but an area where oil palm planting had previously been attempted. He said the company had excluded "all High Conservation Value (HCV) areas including watershed and steep areas" from its recent developments. He added the company had also paused land clearing on "greenfield development on mineral soil and peatland" as of Aug. 11 while creating a new sustainability plan with an NGO. (He didn't name the NGO, citing a nondisclosure agreement.)

Choo said in an updated response to Mongabay that the moratorium on clearing forest had been in place since Aug. 11, but the company had also applied a moratorium to planting activities in the disputed area after meeting online with The Borneo Project in late October.

Residents have taken their dispute further, [filing a lawsuit](#) at Sarawak's High Court in Bintulu in late June, alleging that both Urun Plantations and local officials have disrespected local Indigenous rights in the Long Urun area.

According to a disclosure to investors by parent company Sin Heng Chan, the lawsuit, filed by a law firm led by Senator Anyit, calls into question the company's entire provisional lease, suggesting that it has conflicted with the community's native customary land rights that span 54,478 hectares (134,618 acres), and thus ordering an injunction on development activity in the region.

The lawsuit also alleges that local officials — including from the Sarawak state government, land survey department, village headmen and village security and development committee — violated residents' rights and deceived them.

Choo said the case was ongoing and the company was working to defend itself and "another local resident Mr Lesley Tingang, and the two longhouse leaders against these claims." While not commenting on the claims, he added that residents, including individuals involved in filing the lawsuit, had signed an agreement approving company developments in 2007, and that Urun Plantations had again worked to resolve disputes with residents in 2016.

The residents' lawyer recently received an affidavit from the company, Ipa said, asking them to drop the lawsuit on the grounds that it was frivolous. But Ipa said on Nov. 1 their lawyer was still interested in pursuing the case, and she was not willing to give up.

"If they are willing to come to the negotiation, but of course in that negotiation one of the points [we would want] would be that in 'phase 11,' where they destroyed ... we want the company to not even do maintenance in the area," Ipa said, using the

company's internal term for the disputed area. "Just leave it to become a forest."

Fractured Relations



Community members at a blockade against Urun Plantations. Opponents of the project have held periodic blockades in the Long Urun area starting in late December 2024 through the first half of 2025
Image courtesy of SAVE Rivers and The Borneo Project.

This latest clash between a Sarawak-area developer and residents again threatens to divide Indigenous communities over advancing their villages or preserving forests.

In his response to Mongabay, Choo said only a small number of people were against Urun Plantations' latest development, describing the blockades as being run by "a small group of approximately twenty individuals," mostly from one family. He added the company has invested in the village security and development committee as part of its corporate social responsibility efforts, paying a total of 7.88 million ringgit (\$1.9 million) as of September, and made 1,400 acres (567 hectares) within its concession area available for community use. The plantation project, he said, is supported by most of the leaders of the 15 Indigenous longhouses within the area impacted by the plantation.

Ipa, one of the protesting residents, said she wasn't upset with the plantation's activities in the past, but argued that Urun Plantations should have gotten more approval before expanding development. She said she also felt some of its recent practices were deceitful.

Ipa said she first felt disrespected when company workers cleared a patch of fruit trees on her land in Uma Pawa village, which she said started in 2022. When she tried to report this case to police, Ipa said, they asked her to prove her land ownership, making her feel like an "intruder."

Residents were also surprised to learn that an unmarked attendance list had been used as a show of support, Ipa alleged. She said she'd heard that a blank list signed by Long Urun area residents, reportedly for Christmas donations, was being cited as approval for the company's latest development.

“When we looked at the [list of] names, we asked the people we know, and they said they didn't know this [Urun Plantations initiative] was part of its purpose,” she said. “They say they signed because [local leaders] asked us to sign.”

Ipa said she felt the village security and development committee was making decisions without the full consent of residents, and called on Urun Plantations to find a better way of obtaining residents' free, prior and informed consent.

Celine Lim, managing director of SAVE Rivers, told Mongabay that based on other cases the NGO is involved with in Sarawak, communities are often divided by multiple competing interests: getting funding for their villages, protecting natural resources, and being influenced by state politics. In this case, she said, Urun Plantations' decision to clear a new section triggered a divide between local officials and residents, who now want to renegotiate the terms of their agreement.

The moratorium on clearing in Long Urun is a vindication of community activists, Lim said in a statement.

“After nearly 2 years of standing firm, in spite of experiencing constant gaslighting narratives, these results are a vindication of the communities' claims,” she said. “The fact that Urun Plantations is now halting forest clearing and seeking engagement with the affected communities is a testament to the power of local resistance and international solidarity.”

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