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People and Places

Sarawak: Land of the Hornbills

by Chapal Bashar

FLYING over the South China Sea, while we were approaching Kuching airport by Malaysian Airlines, a vast hilly greenery came into our view. We were looking through the window. And the whole expanse was so dense, that no piece of soil except some sylvan path criss-crossing each other, could be detected.

This was Sarawak — Land of the hornbills — a paradise to nature lovers.

Sarawak, with an area of 124,967 square kilometre, is the largest of Malaysia's 13 states. It is 800 km long and varies from 64 to 192 km in width, with the greater part still covered by primary rainforest and a large area practically uninhabited.

A group of 31 journalists from different Asia-Pacific countries including Bangladesh visited the island state at the invitation of the Sarawak Government. This visit provided the group a first hand knowledge about the prevailing environment of the state and also acquaintance with the life and culture of Sarawak.

Sarawak's economy is basically based on the logging in its tropical rainforest. But this logging has been facing severe criticism from the Western environmentalists who believe that this is logging is causing harm to world environment. Sarawak has countered this campaign claiming that their logging is based on selective basis which doesn't in any way affect the ecological balance.

The Asia-Pacific journalists were briefed on Sarawak's logging pattern and were shown some forest regions during their three-day stay end of April.

Glimpses of the Past

The history of Sarawak, the land that lies on the northern part of Borneo island, starts 40 thousand years ago. This is the estimated age of an early human skull found in Niah Cave of Sarawak, now surrounded by a lush nature reserve.



An ancient cave

The Niah Cave contains some of South-East Asia's earliest traces of human race associated with stone tools of the same period — a set of fascinating wall paintings created by talents of that bygone days in the cave trying to convey their message to the modern man.

From the evidence available, archaeologists consider that homo sapien hunters lived in the Niah caves 35000-40000 years ago. They made and used rough chopper tools, they had tamed fire also. It was not until 10,000 BC that they learnt to sharpen their stone tools and use them for various purposes like cutting and pounding.

By 4,000 BC, Niah men had developed considerable skill in grinding and polishing stone axes. Within the next one thousand years they learnt to use clay pots. The earliest bronze fragments from Niah are dated 150 BC and iron from 700 AD onwards.

Today's Sarawak finds its early beginnings in trading with Arabs, Chinese and Indians, who came seeking for exotic oriental spices and magical potions. The land was exciting for them with intermigration and trading. But this era was stained by rampant piracy and head hunting.

In this scenario, an English adventurer James Brook sailed into Sarawak in 1841. He helped the Sultan of Brunei, the then ruler of the country to quell the rebellion, piracy and head hunting and finally made himself the Rajah. The legacy of white Rajahs still lives on to this day.

Sarawak gained independence from British rule in 1963 through the Federation of Malaysia.

Sarawak, which has a population of 1.8 million with a density of 14.3 persons per square kilometre, is ruled by

the constitutional monarchy with a democratically elected House of Representative at both the federal and state levels.

The present Sarawak government is a coalition of National Front component parties led by Datuk Patingi Tan Sri Haji Abdul Taib Mahmud. He has led the Sarawak government for more than ten years, thus making him longest serving Chief Minister in the history of the state.

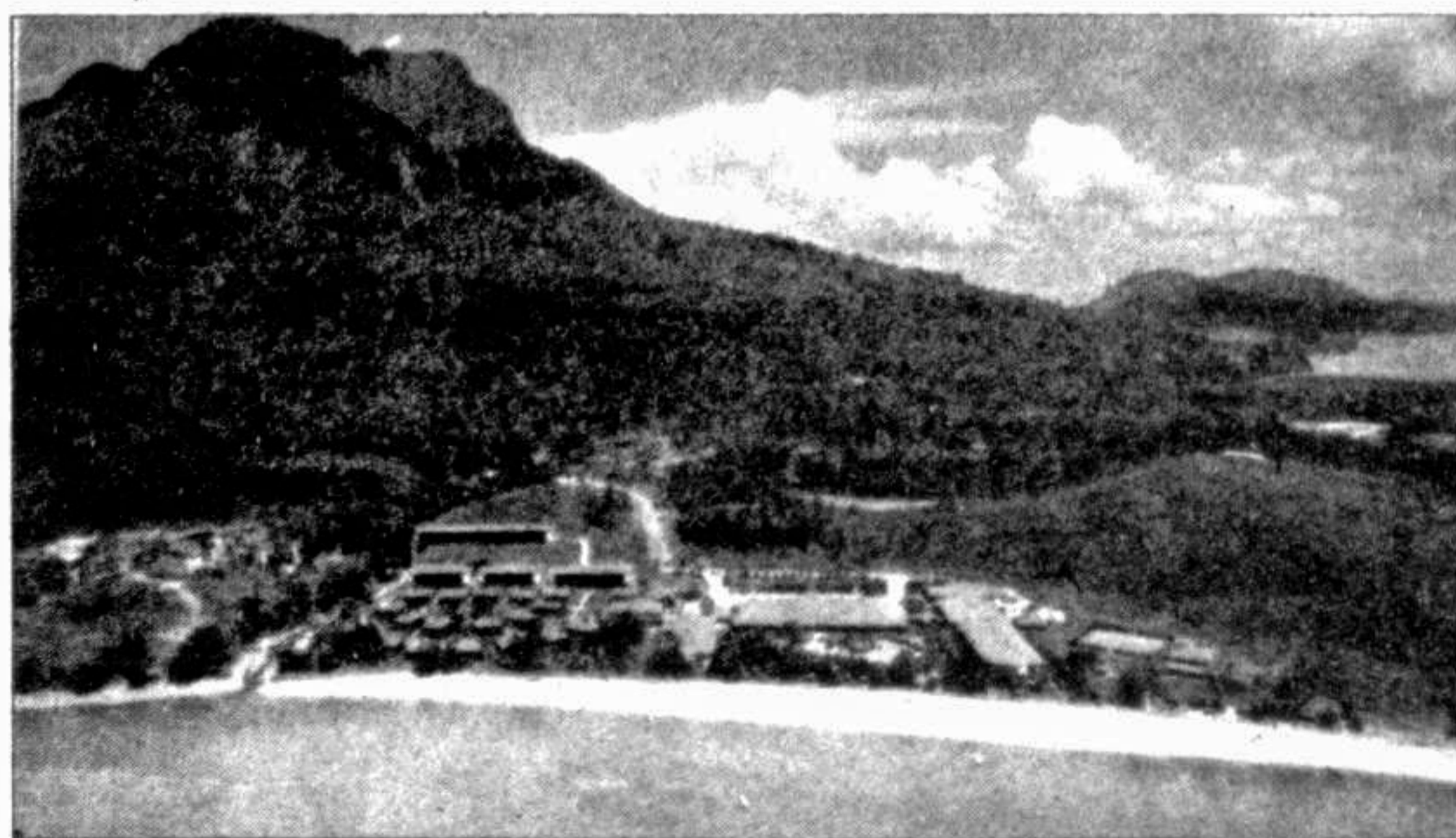
The Economy

In Sarawak, the forestry sector is the second largest after petroleum and gas. However, the forestry plays the vital role in state's economy. It provides employment, directly and indirectly, to about 180,000 people in the state. Sarawak produces about 19 million cubic metres of timber annually and earns about 1360 million US dollars a year by exporting the timber.

Malaysia has been facing campaigns of some Western non-governmental organisations (NGOs) against the logging in Sarawak. The NGOs termed Sarawak's logging in tropical rainforest as an act of deforestation which, according to them, causing harm to ecological balance.

However, Sarawak denied the allegations and said that its logging pattern was not harmful at all for environment.

The Chief Minister Abdul Taib Mahmud told visiting foreign newsmen that the belief that Sarawak's system of selective felling of trees was destroying the environment was not true. It was in fact preserving the environment because



Sarawak landscape

agement in Sarawak is, without doubt, of a higher standard than it is in most tropical timber producing countries and in some developed countries.

Sarawak's agricultural products include rubber, cocoa, coconut, oil palm, pepper, sago, tea and padi.

State's economic growth rate was estimated at 8.7 per cent in 1990.

The People

Apart from having the distinction of being the largest state in Malaysia, Sarawak has the most diverse ethnic composition in the whole nation. It has more than 25 ethnic communities, including migrant Indonesians and Indians.

In the multi-racial society of Sarawak, the Iban forms the largest indigenous group comprising 29.6 per cent of the population followed by Malays with 20.5 per cent, Bidayuh with 8.3 per cent and Melanau with 5.7 per cent.

Other indigenous peoples of Sarawak fall under the Orang Ulu ethnic category includes group such as the Kayan, Kenyah, Kelabit, Kajang Bisaya, Lur Bawang, Penan, Ukit, Murat, Maloh and others which constitutes another 5.4 per cent of the population.

The non-indigenous Chinese comprises 29.3 per cent while other non-indigenous component includes Indians, Javanese and Eurasians.

Total indigenous people in Sarawak are some one million accounting for 69.2 per cent of the population. Ibans, Malays and Chinese make up the three largest groups constituting about 90 per cent of the population.

IBAN: The majority native group Ibans are found throughout all divisions in Sarawak, especially in the lowlands, living mostly in longhouses along main rivers and their tributaries.



Iban traditional ceremony

The longhouses are traditional dwellings in Sarawak in which 10 to 20 or more families live together under one long roof.

The Ibans, once known as "Sea Dayaks", built their longhouses to last 15 to 20 years, or until the farmland in the surrounding area was exhausted. Then they pack up their goods and chattels and move inland, upriver along the coast, wherever fresh farm lands look promising.

About one-third of all Sarawakians are Iban. While some of them live in towns or individual houses, a large number still prefer longhouses.

In the past, Iban longhouses used to be built on very tall pillars to ward off hostile raids — an enemy attacking at night might stick spears upwards through the floor boards, injuring the inmates who slept there. This explains old reports of longhouses above forty feet from the ground.

A traditional longhouse is built of axe-hewn timber, tied

with creeper fibre, roofed with leaf thatch. It is nearly always built by the bank of a navigable river, and the visitor approaches it from the boat jetty. He climbs up a notched log that serves as staircase and finds himself on the open verandah, scene of community and domestic activity. Several doorways lead from the outer to the inner verandah, under the roof. The individual family rooms or doors front the common walkway of the longhouse.

A casual visitor is invited to sit down here for a chat with the longhouse elder, family members enter their relatives' door and make themselves at home.

Though modern housing facilities are available, the Ibans still like to live in longhouses. The new longhouses are of modern design with water and electricity laid on and within reach of the local school, clinic and post office.

A relatively large number of Ibans are now Christians, but they still maintain their strong cultural identity and heritage. A few are Muslims. Many keep to their traditional beliefs, whereby reverence is paid to mythical and legendary heroes

and deities. Traditionally Ibans used dreams and bird augury as a means to determine whether or when to commence an important undertaking.

They have many festivals called Gawai. There are the Gawai Kenyalang (hornbill festival), Gawai Autu (festival for the dead), and Gawai Dayak (annual harvest festival). During such festivals, besides the customary observance of rituals, there is usually much drinking of the locally brewed rice wine (tuak), much merriment and dancing and displays of elaborate traditional costumes.



Iban longhouse



their assistance during major events and in the cycle of rice cultivation. They have system of bird and animal augury which they believe can guide them in their daily life.



Bidayuh bamboo bridge

The Bidayuh are well-known for their bamboo carving and fine basketry. They make most versatile use of bamboo.



MELANAU: The Melanau people, 5.7 per cent of Sarawak's population now mostly living in the central coastal region, were once more widely scattered. They traditionally lived near the sea, within reach of the pirates. The Melanau built massive houses forty feet above ground, to protect themselves from raids and to facilitate defense. The majority of this community are Muslims. Besides Islam, Christianity and traditional animist beliefs are also practised.

There are customs and beliefs that are practised and observed by the Melanau especially among Liku or Pagan groups of Melanau community. The most significant traditional customs observed by the Melanau are wedding ceremonies and sickness rituals.

Borneo people have a healthy respect for the supernatural. The tribal doctor is not only a physician, but also a mediator between the human and the spirit world. The Melanau had a system of magic that influenced their way of life. The faith healer was a respected and slightly feared man who combined handicraft with magic.

ORANG ULU: The Orang Ulu are among Sarawak's most artistic people. They carve, paint, do bead work, and spend much time on embellishing their dwellings, boats, household utensils, clothing and shelves.

In the past, the Orang Ulu were famous throughout the region as sword-smiths. They extracted iron from the ore found in their area, they forged it into excellent blades which they tempered in the cold



The hornbill

mountain streams.

Tattoo is much popular among the Orang Ulu people. The high ranking ladies among the Orang Ulu wear the best tattoos. A middle-class maiden may have a 'bracelet' around her wrist, a chief's daughter has her forearms, hands and legs decorated with a fine pattern that looks as if she was wearing dark blue lace gloves and stockings.

CHINESE: There was already a small Chinese community in Sarawak's capital Kuching when James Brook established his rule in 1841. Chinese migration was actively encouraged by the Brook ad-



Orang Ulu maiden dance

PENAN: The Penan is the only nomadic tribe in Sarawak. Most of the eight thousand Penans have already settled down in permanent communities, while only four hundred are still roaming through the jungles and following age-old nomadic life-style.

The Sarawak government has the initiative and the efforts for the settlement of all the nomads by providing them modern facilities they need. However, some Western environmentalists and NGOs do not approve such efforts. They consider the initiatives as violation of human rights since, according to them, it changes the life style of Penans.

Sarawak government has refuted Western allegations saying that they were only ensuring Penans' rights as citizen of the country by providing them food, medicine and shelter. Government claims that due to such efforts, the number of Penans has grown tremendously since colonial days. "Penans themselves wanted modern facilities while they maintain own custom and culture," say authorities.



Penan youth

The nomadic Penans' shelters are quickly constructed to last for a few weeks or at the most, months. They are sited near wild Sago trees, the Penan's staple food. After these have been used up, the family moves on.

A Penan speciality is the

manufacture and accurate use of blowpipe. A wood beam of adequate length is fixed in a drilling platform and then perforated by patient manual labour. The pipe is trimmed by axe and knife, and finally polished. Blowpipe ammunition is a softwood plug tipped with hardwood dart. Blowpipe poison, carefully dosed to suit the prey, is made from the sap of a tree, known as upas.

MALAY: Ethnically, the Malays in Sarawak are a mixed race, who follow the Muslim faith. This is a result of the physical and religious assimilation of different peoples who settled on the coast of the land. Such varied backgrounds have produced mixed customs and manners, whilst their strong religious faith provided a unifying force for a distinct Malay culture.

In cultural aspects, the Malays are noted for their architectural design and carved wooden ornamentation on the exterior and in the interior of their houses. The house of an urban Malay family is of gracious structure well adapted to the climate. Like all local houses, it is built of wood.

Under the wildlife protection ordinance in Sarawak, more than 51 species of wildlife are totally protected under the law. The protected species include, Orang Ulu, Rhinoceros, Bornean Gibbon, Giant Squirrel, different species of monkeys and wild cats, marine turtles, whales, dolphins and porpoises, hornbills, eagles and other birds. The beautiful Hornbills are regarded as national bird found in plenty in Sarawak.

To control and manage the degradation of wildlife population in the state, wildlife sanctuaries are constituted. The sanctuaries also cater for the resettlement of protected wild animals which may be confiscated from the public, who knowingly or unknowingly have kept them as pets.

Sarawak has long been one of the best kept secrets of Asia. But this secret is now being shared more and more by the outside world. The flora and fauna, cultural life of indigenous communities, all attract tourists into Sarawak.

The arrival of tourists in Sarawak is on the sharp increase for quite some years. In 1991, a total of 509,597 tourists visited the state and the number was 17 per cent more than the previous year. The government expects 1.5 million tourists a year by 2000.

The state government has taken a massive plan to promote tourism and attract tourists in this 'Land of the Hornbills', which was once known as the 'Land of the Headhunters'.

ministration and groups were recruited to work in mines and in agricultural schemes, while others came in under their own auspices as merchants and planters. About one-third of the state's population is now Chinese.

The largest sub-group in Chinese community are the Hakka, the majority of whom are agriculturalists and gardeners. Next are the Foocho, known for their economic versatility. The third largest group are the Hokkien, town dwellers who dominate the commercial world.

Despite the diversity and close proximity, the people of Sarawak are tolerant of each other's differences and live in harmony within their own territory with their neighbours. Each of the Sarawak people is proud and sensitive of their racial and cultural background.

The Nature: Flora and Fauna

Being just north of the equator, Sarawak has a hot and humid climate with the temperatures ranging from 22 to 32 degrees centigrade. The mean annual rainfall is about 254 centimetres.

Due to this ideal climatic conditions, the tropical rainforest of Sarawak is rich and varied in plant and animal life. Presently, the total land area under forest cover is classified into various forest types. There are over 8,000 species of flowering plants and over 20,000 species of animals, majority of which are insects.

The forests are home to numerous species of flora and fauna, many of which are indigenous to this part of the world. Realising the need to protect these genetic resources, large tracts of forests land have been reserved as national parks and wildlife sanctuaries. The total acreage of forest land to be gazetted as national parks and wild life sanctuaries would be about one million hectares.

Out of the total forest cover in Sarawak, about 4.5 million ha or 53 per cent are under the permanent forest estate and 290,689 ha under totally protected area. The rest is under the stateland forest, the forestland which are not reserved permanently according to the Forestry Ordinances. Nevertheless, the state government is determined to enlarge the permanent forest estate.

Now, the greatest threat to the forest resources is the practice of shifting cultivation which is prevalent in the hill forests and causing loss of forest resources. Steps are taken by various government agencies to reduce this type of cultivation. It will require time to solve this long-term problem.

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Strange endemic orchid found on trees by rivers in many parts of Sarawak.



Penan youth

My Friend Akhlaq

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plivity in the case against colonel Taher, which left Akhlaq broken in body though not in spirit.

Our last meeting two months before his untimely death was given to reminiscing which inadvertently was tinged with the sadness of yet another impending separation. The world may not remember for long Dr Akhlaq Rahman, brilliant economist, superb teacher, outstanding Marxist theoretician and political activist, but the dwindling ranks of his friends will cherish the warmth of his friendship, his generosity, his prowess of intellect in a scenario denuded of the intelligentia and finally as a combative fighter in worthy causes. The bell that tolls for him also tolls for those who once shared his dreams and some of his tribulations.

The writer is a former Minister for Information and Ambassador to the Soviet Union.