

## **BACKGROUND: ARARA ABADI'S NEW ACTS OF VIOLENCE AGAINST THE SAKAI TRADITIONAL COMMUNITIES**

On Tuesday, April 27, 2021, amid Covid-19 pandemic crisis, more than 200 Arara Abadi security personnel rushed into the area claiming to be their concession. Arara Abadi is a subsidiary and wood supplier of Asia Pulp & Paper, the largest Indonesian paper producer.

However, the area is traditional land for around 30 of the Sakai people, where they have their fields and ancestral graves. Security personnel from Arara Abadi came to expel the Sakai community and start planting eucalyptus to supply Asia Pulp & Paper. Two months earlier, the Sakai people had planted in the area vegetables and tubers (Jengkol, mangalo sweet potatoes, bananas, chilies, and cassava).

That day, around 20 members of the indigenous Sakai tribe, mostly women with their children, were in the fields clearing and planting an approximately 10 ha area they claim to be their ancestral land<sup>6</sup>. Suddenly company security forces broke in and intimidated the Sakai people. When company security forces tried to break into their fields, the indigenous Sakai people tried to protect their gardens by setting up wooden bars, trying to hold back company security forces. "This is our customary land. - they said - If you want to take our land, you better just kill us". Three women sat down to prevent the security to enter, and were forcibly picked up by the female security personnel. The chaos resulted in several community members being injured, including an old woman who was forcibly lifted and thrown in a ditch, and one man was forcibly dragged away. In addition, the incident affected the children of the Sakai tribe who witnessed the acts of violence, and who continue to be scared and traumatised when they see people in security uniforms.

When the NGO Coalition for People and Forests (CoPF) team visited the field on May 5, 2021, it noted that the company's heavy equipment was still working to clear the land to resume plantation.

### **Arara Abadi's violence against Sakai people continues unabated since 1996**

This is not the first conflict handled by the company with violence in Suluk Bongkal, Koto Pait (Bengkalis Regency, Riau province, Sumatra).

Back in 2017, the Sakai people who planted in the area were intimidated by the company. One of the members of the indigenous Sakai tribe was then dragged and forced out of his house causing physical injuries. Arara Abadi had previously attempted to burn down his house, which the company eventually destroyed.

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<sup>6</sup> Of total 205 ha Sakai's land used for garden for their livelihood



*Figure 1. Sakai tribe women trying to block company personnel from destroying their livelihood fields by blocking the road of the security forces Arara Abadi, 27 April 2021 (photo LBH Pekanbaru)*

The conflict between Arara Abadi and the Indigenous people of the Sakai tribe began in 1996, when Arara Abadi was awarded a concession for industrial plantations over an area of 299,975 ha<sup>7</sup>. The concession extended over 205 ha of land traditionally owned by the Sakai people.

Incidents and conflicts have increased since, reaching a peak in 2008, when a whole hamlet of Suluk Bongkal was burned down, and a child and an infant died as a consequence of the assault<sup>8</sup>.

The only way the community managed to meet and talk with the company was to seize their chainsaws. Long negotiations resulted in an agreement including the company's commitment to guard the ancestral burial of the Sakai tribe. But the agreement was short-lived.

The Sakai people are nomadic and practice shifting cultivation every 2-5 years. They often bury their family members in the place where they temporarily live. As a result, their fields often include the graves of their ancestors. For the indigenous people of the Sakai tribe, these graves not only mark the tribal gardens, but are considered as sacred places where they carry out spiritual rituals for their ancestors. The Sakai people believe that pilgrimages to ancestral graves

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<sup>7</sup> In 2013, the permit was updated so that the area was reduced to 296.262 ha.

<sup>8</sup> <https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2008/12/19/00365789/~Regional~Sumatera?page=all>

heal sick children. They usually take them to bathe near the graves of their ancestors while saying prayers for safety and peace.

The company kept carrying out reckless forestry operations and, in early 2021, company machinery crushed Sakai's ancestral burials.

The people had to see their forest – and their source of livelihood - cleared and converted into plantation, so they tried to plant some vegetables after the timber harvest. But it was pointless, as immediately after, the company evicted them and replanted eucalyptus.

“We have endured hardships and many intimidations in our lives, all of which we can bear. But not if our ancestors are not respected” said Batin Ridwan, the Sakai tribe leader .

The logged eucalyptus trees not only smashed ancestral graves, they also polluted the river where people sourced freshwater. The river's waters are now dark, and the fish died.