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A FIELD of ripening padi in Sekuduk-Chupak.



A COMBINE harvester harvesting padi on Ayong's farm. PHOTOS: ADELINE LIONG

> First of a four-part series

Combine harvesters come to aid of padi farmers

BY ADELINE LIONG

REVOLUTION has come quietly to Sekuduk-Chupak, a rice planting area in Siburan, Kuching Division in the shapes of six combine harvesters. Instead of harvesting their padi manually, the villagers are leaving it to a private contractor, Ceria Agriculture Services Sdn Bhd which is using six combine harvesters to carry out the laborious work.

Bidayuh padi farmer, Ayong ak Manuk, 51, who was utilising the contract service for the first time, was jubilant. She lives in Kampung Plaman Payang, one of the four Bidayuh villages in Sekuduk-Chupak.

With the help of her 18-year-old twin sons, she was getting ready empty fertiliser bags to store the grains as soon as the padi was harvested. In just a matter of minutes, as many as five bags were full.

On hand to supervise the harvesting of the padi was a young Ceria staff, Yeong Fook Chui.

Ayong had rented 1 1/2 acres of land to plant padi. With the help of a combine harvester, it took her just one day to harvest her entire crop. In the past, it would take her and her family one whole month to harvest a similar plot size.

"It is definitely easier to use the machine. Now, I can sleep soundly

at night. I have no headaches, pains in my back or hands," she told the *New Sarawak Tribune* during an interview at her farm.

The speedy harvest also ensures better quality of grains and less crop loss. All these translate to higher yield return for the mother of five and grandmother of two and the other padi farmers in the area.

Ayong is looking forward to the next padi-planting season in October. With more time allowed for land preparation, she plans to have a bigger padi farm. The rice farmers in Sekuduk-Chupak practise double-cropping; the first padi planting season is from May to August while the second planting season is from October to February.

While her family will eat some of the rice, Ayong plans to sell most of her crop.

Sinel ak Naiyut, 75, was another happy Bidayuh padi farmer in Sekuduk-Chupak. The combine harvester had just helped him to gather the white and red rice he planted on one acre of land.

He was glad that the harvest took just one day instead of one whole month. With the help of his daughters, Panda ak Sinel and Diyong ak Sinel, he was busy drying his padi on a mat on his farm.

Sinel was happy to have used the contract harvesting service for the first time. Like Ayong, he will



MANAGING director of Ceria Group, Thomas Hii Tiong Kong (second left) and director of Ceria Group, Dato Haji Affandi Tahir (centre) pose with Sinel (left) and his daughters, Panda (second right) and Diyong.

eat some of the rice and sell the rest.

Meanwhile, Bidayuh padi farmer, Leman ak Sumis, 54, is using Ceria's contract harvesting service for the second time.

The father of five is one of the traditional padi farmers taking part in a contract farming scheme to produce red rice for Nestle (Malaysia) Berhad. He has planted red rice on ten acres of land.

Since the harvesting season started in Seduduk-Chupak recently, Leman has already gathered padi from three acres. He is waiting for the padi in the other areas to ripen. His wife, Makod ak Sugas, 50, has already begun drying the padi under the hot sun.

Leman revealed he would be selling his produce to Nestle at RM1.20 per kg.

Managing director of Ceria Group, Thomas Hii Tiong Kong, explained that Ceria Agriculture Services Sdn Bhd was charging the farmers RM450 per hectare for the harvesting.

According to him, the machines are rented from the State Farmers Organisation and made available to Ceria through the assistance of the Agriculture Department. The government is also subsidising Ceria RM300 per acre.

"This is the second time we are helping the farmers in Sekuduk-

Chupak to harvest their padi. There are 140 farmers here and they are planting padi on 100 hectares of land.

"We have selected the area because of its proximity to Kuching. We need to supervise the harvesting closely," said Hii.

He added that although Ceria stood to make RM75,000 from the harvesting of padi at Sekuduk-Chupak, a "big chunk of the money" would go to the Farmers' Organisation as rental. Another "big chunk" would also be spent on repairing the machines. Imported from Korea, they cost a hefty RM100,000 plus each.

Meanwhile, some of the money paid to Ceria will also be used to pay the operators of machines while some will be spent on the company's overheads.

According to Hii, the operators of the machines have to work day and night.

"There are no weekends for them," he said.

Hii explained that Ceria had decided to come to the aid of the padi farmers after realising that many were ageing and had difficulty harvesting their crops.

"The average farmers can plant two or three acres of padi but are not physically fit to gather the entire crops," he pointed out.

Hii said previously, Ceria



SINEL and daughters, Panda (centre) and Diyong (left) drying newly harvested padi on their farm.



A BAG of newly harvested padi on Ayong's farm.



LEMAN showing his newly harvested red rice.

had also helped padi farmers in Tanjung Pura Paddy Scheme, Tanjung Bijat and Stumbin in Sri Aman to harvest their crops.

"The padi farmers had time to prepare for Gawai the last time the machines were used in Sri Aman," he pointed out.

Besides helping the padi farmers in Sekuduk-Chupak to harvest their crops, Ceria is also keen to help them increase their yields.

"Ten years ago, Sekuduk-Chupak was a thriving padi growing area with 236 hectares devoted to the crop. Now, there are only

100 hectares of padi land with weeds growing on many of the former padi plots.

"Padi planting is not rocket science. As long as you do the right things, you can get high yields," Hii said.

He was confident with the correct approach, Sekuduk-Chupak could easily increase its padi yield per season from 200 tonnes to 600 tonnes "in one or two years."

"One of the ways to increase the yields, of course, is for each farmer to increase his/her farm size," he added.



CLOSE-UP of Sinel and daughters, Panda (right) and Diyong.



AYONG and her twin sons busy filling empty fertiliser bags with newly harvested padi.



AYONG and her sons are happy with their padi yields.



LEMAN's wife, Makod drying padi under the hot sun.