

The ongoing struggle of the Seberuang Dayaks

By Dr. Willie Smits

It is still early at 3 am, even for me. The mosques and the roosters have not announced their presence yet. But sleep is hard to get by after yesterday's meeting with Lambung, Nayau, Agung, Surya, Riyanto and other true fighters from the Dayak community here in the interior of West Kalimantan, Borneo.

After the usual logistical nightmare of reaching Sintang the day before yesterday in the evening, and having such a good day with Dr. Sri and Dr. Victor and all the orangutans here at the Sintang Orangutan Center, the reality hit hard again when I heard the latest stories in the struggle of the Seberuang tribe against the oil palm companies that are cutting down their beautiful forest.

Sometimes it seems like fighting a losing battle but giving up is no option. Let me try to summarize some of the latest developments. Lambung of the Seberuang tribe in Tempunak put in an official complaint with the RSPO against the DSN group but they answered that he has no proof that he is representing the tribe and that the company had shown them proof of payments to a village head with a ridiculous low figure for thousands of acres of valuable forest at a few dollars per hectare. So it was legal and Lambung had to come with more proof. For me this is more proof that the RSPO approach may lack something...

At the same time the tribe had meetings with so many officials here and all let them down. They even had a meeting with representatives of the Kencana Alam Permai and Prima Sawit Andalan companies of the DSN group and together with their Seberuang Temenggung, the regional traditional leader that rules in cases where the traditional laws are broken, reached an agreement. Both the Dayaks and the companies promised that they would wait for the official consultation with the Bupati, the district head of Sintang, who had promised to facilitate such meeting.

But despite constant reminders and visits to so many government offices none of the promises were kept and then the companies sent the bulldozers back in and started cutting again, including in beautiful forest protected by the people and on land where they had no right at all. Of course when the RSPO will check they will hear from the companies that the chainsaw operators that are entering those forests are just local people, but all from the Sambas region, an area near the coast, known for its skilled chainsaw operators that are hired by almost all the oil palm companies to do the dirty work in West Kalimantan! But the Dayaks are building their case with recorded interviews with various people exposing the the real masterminds of the companies that are behind the cutting.

I again heard so many dirty tricks that the companies use routinely, it absolutely infuriated me that there seems no way any outsider can bring real change for the local Dayaks that according the law, even the basic establishment law of the state Indonesia, have rights to their traditional forests. To destroy those rights one needs to destroy their culture. And that is exactly what is happening at a grand scale right now.

I have written before about the sneaky way companies are buying the durian trees at ridiculous high prices. But they do not buy them for their wood, which is nothing special, but because these trees were actually planted in the past to indicate the locations of the traditional forests. So remove the proof first, and then it is time for the next series of dirty tricks.

Then they set up families against families, villages against villages, and this is one of the most effective ways to destroy the Dayak communities. I saw the tears in Agung's eyes when he told he could no longer speak with his uncle that tried to stop his activism for the Saran forest protection because his uncle was now on the side of the oil palm company. Very often then, instead of fighting their own brothers, the Dayaks rather give up and out of sadness and frustration start drinking more. The social disruption can become so bad that they no longer conduct the Gawai (harvest feast) and other ceremonies that show that their traditions are still alive and followed. Eventually either their land is taken or they give it up for the less than 50 dollars per hectare that the company gives them for "the plants on the land". Not the land itself!!! No that would mean recognizing land rights! Just the GRIT or Ganti Rugi Tanam Tumbuh.

Surya Suka, another Dayak activist from the Putussibau region close to the border with Malaysia also attended the meeting. He told how the village heads and traditional leaders of his region were invited to Pontianak, Jakarta, even Singapore to have “meetings” with the oil palm companies. There in the buzzing and overwhelming city, far away from the villagers and the social control, they were treated “extremely well” and asked to sign a list of presence. But those lists were made into approvals of giving away the traditional forest! Drunk with alcohol and guilty pleasures like bribes and females the leaders would be ashamed when they came back and just accept their fate. As far as I know only the Tempunak Seberuang Dayaks have still resisted these tactics.

Nayau: “They came and gave me a ticket to Jakarta, and I told them I can go there when I want myself, I have money. They came with wine and liquor and I poured it on the ground. I told them that we as a tribe already stood up against the Barito logging company of the president to prevent them from destroying our forest why would we let you in!!”

Then I heard the stories how Sedia, the younger brother of Nayau, was arrested and jailed. He had faced off with the chainsaw operators cutting the trees on his land, land with beautiful trees that he himself had protected for the water supply! And indeed he had threatened them verbally when they refused to stop, and they ran away and he took their chainsaws and brought them to the Temenggung, the traditional leader of the Tempunak Dayaks. This was on the 26th of November. Then on the 27th and the 28th again more chainsaws in his forest! He went to find them and encountered three more chainsaw operators cutting intact forest. They again refused to go and in his emotion he drew his machete and chased them out of his forest. He took their chainsaws and threw them in the river.

Then a gossip went around that Sedia had killed one of the wood thieves and immediately the police came and arrested him. The investigation showed that he obviously had not, but it took weeks and direct action by the bishop of Sintang and lawyers and lots of persuasion of all kinds of officials to get Sedia out of jail. But he still has to report each week to the police!

After his release it was agreed and promised that there would be this settlement according the Dayak traditional law. Well, needless to say, that did not happen and the bulldozers and chainsaws are back again!! And now the company hired in another village a house owned by a person that has fallen for the money named Dugis in Lebak Lantang another village besides Sungai Bulu where the company is heading for the steep slopes with valuable timber.

Indeed it is not just the land for oil palms that the companies are after, which should not be suitable for oil palms in the first place, but the timber on it. The Dayaks are now doing an investigation and are finding out why the police would not follow up their reports on the corrupt village head (an outsider that married in the tribe...) that is in cahoots with the oil palm company. They are coming up with evidence that some Malaysian company is involved and is bribing its way around to get the IPK (Izin Pemanfaatan Kayu, meaning a Permit to Use the Waste Wood!) of the wood of the land that the oil palm company will clear. Business as usual, or rather corruption as usual!

In their frustration, or rather desperation, the Dayaks organized a big tribal meeting in the new longhouse in Tembak, the heart of their resistance movement. Some 65 traditional leaders and representatives of the tribes around the Saran-Kujau forest complex showed up and deliberated for three full days! I joined the meeting on the third day to speak to them about the alternatives there are for oil palm and our plans to build a Tengkawang nut (Illipe nut) factory and the work we were already doing with the sugar palms to improve income from the forest. I wrote a separate blog on the Tengkawang factory. Here is a picture of some of the group in front of the Tembak longhouse when several people already had gone to avoid the rain that makes roads into their village virtually impassable.



Now in the last week of January 2014 with the bulldozers back to destroying forests I was told that the Dayaks had taken the keys of the oil palm company equipment so that the machines once more stopped roaring. In the meeting of the Seberuang Dayaks with Surya Suka I heard that they exposed another highly regarded Dayak fighter. It turned out that although he was saying all the right things, this person was also a consultant for some oil palm companies. With a sigh Lambung said "We have no one that we can trust but ourselves. No government helps us, no international group can stop these environmental crimes. Really all we have left is our traditional law and our unity. The Adat, our traditions given to us by our forefathers, is all we have to secure our future!". And with sad eyes everyone around the table agreed...

My throat was choking and tears welled in my eyes. There are so many solutions, so many organizations, but in the end these brave Dayaks can really only save their forests themselves. So many more skilled groups compete for attention and funds in the Internet. Still I believe that we will succeed in securing the Saran forest, with all its majestic trees, waterfalls, Rafflesia flowers and everything an intact rain forest can offer, will survive. And I do believe that our work with the orangutans and providing local people with small starting points for better economic well-being does help. Most of all it helps by giving them hope and showing that we do not let them alone and are trying to give them a voice. It raises their spirits not to give up on their forests, their future.