

## **Illegal Logging in Indonesia: A Field Report from West Kalimantan**

- Ajit Joy  
Expert, Crime Prevention  
UNODC Jakarta

### **Background**

For a four day period sometime during the past six months, UNODC Crime Prevention Expert, Ajit Joy travelled to Kalimantan or the island of Borneo. There he witnessed the sharp end of environmental destruction and the corruption which fuels it.

### **DAY 1**

After an 80-minute flight from Jakarta, I arrive in Pontianak, a town that is bang on the equator. Pontianak is the capital of West Kalimantan, one of the provinces of the massive island of Kalimantan, shared by Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei, earlier known as Borneo (still so on the Malaysian side). I am in Kalimantan to understand the nature of the forests and further to study and see illegal logging and other forest crimes and their relation to corruption. Another interest of mine is also to learn more about the much talked about REDD (Reducing emissions from deforestation) projects, and check pilot sites where they could be implemented.

Kalimantan, an island rich in natural resources, tropical forests, peat lands, minerals, and abundant water – is a truly blessed land. This perhaps is the reason why this land has fallen prey to man's unending greed. Cruelly, this land has been exploited over the years, which, even to this day continues. Millions of hectares of forests have been logged, large tracts of land converted to oil palm plantations, peat forests burnt, land excavated for minerals.

Yuyun Kurniawan, Director of the NGO Titian and his staff, Ian Hilman receive me in Pontianak airport. I am to be with them for the next three full days. That evening over dinner of 'bihun goreng' and fried rice noodles, Yuyun talks about the problem of illegal logging. "Government", he says, "is one of the biggest consumers of illegal logs". Large amounts of wood are needed in Pontianak, a

town prospering in the wealth of Kalimantan. The 30-kilometer road from the airport to the town is buttressed by logs of wood. The soil in these parts being loamy, wood is used to reinforce foundations. Imagine the number of trees needed to undergird 30-kilometer of road with wood. Similarly, all large buildings both government and private are reinforced with wood foundations and all this allegedly using illegal wood. Pontianak sits on millions of illegal logs. "There is no market for legal wood, since this is much costlier than what is easily available illegally," says Yuyun.

Oil palm plantation seems to be the biggest concern for Yuyun and his colleague, Ian. Thousands of hectares of forest land are being converted into palm plantations. Apart from the loss of forest cover and wild life, it also affects the life of the indigenous people like the Dayaks, the original inhabitants of Kalimantan. Among the wild life affected worst off are the orangutans of Kalimantan. I was to see for myself in one of the rehabilitation centers run by the International Animal Rescue, infant and juvenile orangutans rescued from palm oil plantations. The little ones were being kept as pets after their mothers killed and eaten by the plantation washers.

Oil plantations come backed by big money mostly owned by big industrial groups, which have the power to bribe the government functionaries and intimidate the local population to have their way in everything from acquiring land, encroaching on forest land, illegal logging and offering poor bargains in the benefits to be shared with the local community. "Pontianak often comes under a haze of smoke for days on end," says Ian. "This is when planters burn trees over thousands of acres of forest land for palm plantation." Ian mentions the story of an NGO that had summoned up the courage to file a case against a plantation company for causing this pollution. The police however, closed that case citing insufficient evidence as the reason.

Corruption, we realized, is central to all these issues as we continued our conversation in Winny's café, one of the oldest coffee shops in Pontianak, which continues to retain its old and rugged charm. Over black coffee served in a small glass, my NGO friends had a lot to say about weak law enforcement and corruption. However, the good part is that things are better now. The rampant and naked looting of the forests appears to have declined say my friends. After a 2004

Presidential decree wherein the military and the police have been asked to play an active role in reducing illegal logging, there has been some respite.

“Do you know that orangutans contribute to reducing green house gas?” This was the message emblazed across Yuyun’s T shirt. I was curious, I asked him to explain. “Orangutans eat over 200 different kinds of fruit,” Yuyun said. “They generally live in an area of 2 square kilometers and disperse the seeds of these fruits over this area. They are thus natural tree planters,” Yuyun added, with a smile.

## **DAY 2**

At 8.30 am we are airborne in a small aircraft headed to Ketapang, a small coastal town 470 km to the south of Pontianak. There is no proper road that connects Pontianak and Ketapang. The only way that you can reach the provincial capital from Ketapang is by air or water. Flying at 9,000 ft, one sees mostly forests from the window and the occasional rivers meandering across the mighty expanse of Kalimantan. But also clearly visible are the monstrous oil plantations which are easily discernable from the air with their lined rows of trees. Ketapang is a town with a bustling port, from which timber disperses outwards from both the government-approved concession forests and illegal sources. While Ketapang is a major port, I was surprised at the number of minor ports that one sees once outside of the town. Large sea-faring boats dock and these small ports are the ones which serve as the major bases of illegal log export transportation.

After checking into the newly-built Aston Hotel which caters to all the business visits to Ketapang, we quickly drive off to Sungai Tolak, 50 km away from Ketapang. This small village is on the banks of the Tolak River. The river has black water, owing to its journey through peat forests. Peat forests, due to water logging, hold layers and layers of partly decomposed leaves and wood which form a layer of acidic peat. Peat lands are an efficient storehouse for carbon and they have the highest carbon density among terrestrial biomass.

At Sungai Tolak, we rendezvous at a house close to the river which is used by several NGOs as a base for their work in the area. Joined by young men and women from Flora and Fauna International, RAFT (Responsible Asia Forestry and Trade) and a few local NGOs, 11 of us including 2 boat drivers start our journey up

the river Tolak in a country boat at noon. We are now in the Sentap Kanchang peat forests. I see abandoned saw mills, cleared stretches barren land and forests burnt by nature and by man.

We arrive at a small wooden jetty in the middle of the forest. There are a couple of tiny huts made on stilts by the river bank. A boat stands there with freshly cut and sized planks of wood. This is the point from which wood carried on wheel barrows from deep inside the forests is loaded on to boats and taken to the nearest village. From the river bank, into the depth of the forest lies a parallel trail of wooden planks, wide enough to accommodate a two-wheel dolly. We start walking, on these planks. After a 3 km walk through the peat undergrowth surrounded by a few tall trees and an equal number of stumps we hear the harsh sound of the chain saw at work. We follow the sound for another 2 km through the wood track and suddenly, before us we find young men, rather boys, carrying freshly chopped planks of wood. There are six of them in all from the nearby village. They had spent 3-4 days together in the forests and cut about 4 large trees a day all for \$3 they can earn a day. They worked in the mosquito infested forests, walking long distances, carrying heavy weights under the ever present risk of being caught by the law enforcers. They offer no protest to our photographing, either them or their illegal operations. Many such teams of illegal loggers are active in that Sentap Kanchang forests that very day.

I am told to expect sightings of orangutans, but today we don't see any. But I am not entirely disappointed as on the way back we encounter lots of monkeys and langurs and birds of different kinds.

It is 7 pm when we reach back to where we had left our cars. The night sky is full of thousands of brightly shining stars, a sight that has become so rare for those of us, like me, who live an urban life

### **DAY 3**

In the hotel during breakfast I meet Barita Manullarang, who is with the International Animal Rescue (IAR). The main activity of the IAR in Ketapang is running the orangutan rehabilitation centre they have recently taken over from a local NGO. I request to be shown the centre. He agrees and we go there. The Country Head of the IAR, Karmele Sanchez, who is in town to get the Centre

going, gives us a guided tour. The centre is sadly housed in a cramped space right in the middle of human habitation. Karmen and the team are trying to locate another location close to forests that will be better suited for the rehabilitation of the orangutans. I have the pleasure of watching some cute infants of less than a year and some bigger ones of up to 5 years. "Orangutans are very attached to their mothers. In the wild they continue living with their mothers until they are 6-7 years old," explained Karmen. Most of the Orangutan's in the centre were victims of deforestation for oil plantations. Yuyun at this point talks about the casual nature of wildlife law enforcement. All that the law enforcers do is rescue the orangutans and hand them over to rescue centres. They rarely charge the owners for offences though possession of Orangutans as pets is a punishable offence under the wildlife Act. Hundreds of Orangutans now live in centres such as the one run by IAR in Kalimantan.

Later in the morning, we hire a small speed boat for a ride on the Pawan River. Riding through this river that flows through the heart of Ketapang, we see several closed saw mills. In broad day light we see at least three boats pulling rafts of illegal logs not too far from a police post. We can also see large quantities of legally cut wood floating on the water near gigantic saw mills. These mills are processing tons of wood flowing in from the concession forests, wherein companies are permitted to legally log. However, it is possible that illegally logged wood might also be mixed with this legally logged timber, a normal modus operandi for large scale illegal loggers.

Ketapang now has a new business - Swallow nests. Giant structures that look like godowns have been built specially designed to attract the swallows, which build nests in niches in the walls. These nests are a delicacy in various parts of the world and fetch much money. The swallow nest houses have become ubiquitous in Ketapang. Many illegal loggers are now in the business of also harvesting swallow nests.

By midday we start for Kendawangan, a port town that is a major transit area for illegal logs and wood and wild life going to the island of Java, until a couple of years ago. Now this port looks nearly abandoned with a few large boats docked under an overcast sky. Around Kendawangan, we observe large palm oil plantations and mines. Compromised forest land! We drive past a Dayak village on

the side of a road close by. Not one of them stays in a house with traditional Dayak architecture. Their whole life that had once centered on the forest has changed. There are no forests in the vicinity. Barren hills are all that you see. Tall tree stumps stood out in several places. You can see large stretches of Accacia plantations. Close to the village lies a two-track dirt road through which heavy trucks with many wheels are constantly moving carrying bauxite, rocks and other minerals. The Dayaks are now in the mainstream of development I guess!

#### **DAY 4**

At 6.30 am we start for Melano, 100 km from Ketapang. Melano is a little town by the side of a river with the same name. This town is beyond the hills of the Gunung Palong National park. Some years back either banks of the river close to the town were dotted with saw mills. Now there are no signs of major log transfers. One side of the river is now lined with structures that look like ghost houses which are built for swallows to nest.

Later that afternoon I have an interesting discussion with the Flora and Fauna International (FFI) and my friends from Titian. I quiz them on their REDD project with the Australian investment company Maquaire in Ketapang and the involvement of Merrill Lynch with FFI in Aceh. I am curious to know the reasons and the benefits for the involvement of these financial giants in the REDD projects of Indonesia. The NGO guys can't provide me with an answer.

UNODC will through its new projects support the Indonesian Government in strengthening the law enforcement response to illegal logging especially in Papua province. The project will also work closely with the prosecution and judiciary to improve the conviction rate in forest crimes. Apart from that there would be activities to break the linkage between illegal logging and corruption. Through another study presently being carried out, UNODC is assessing the relationship between REDD and governance and illegal logging.