

FEATURE-Sumatran forest people adapt ancient health rules for pandemic

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DENPASAR, Indonesia, June 25 (Thomson Reuters Foundation) - Jangat Pico, a member of the Orang Rimba indigenous people who live on Indonesia's Sumatra island, was reluctant to say the name of the new coronavirus when he heard it for the first time.

"In Orang Rimba custom, the name of a disease cannot be said aloud," Pico, 24, told the Thomson Reuters Foundation by video call. "If we say (it), then that disease will come to us."

Superstitions around illness are embedded in a belief system practiced by Pico and about 5,000 other tribe members.

"Fever" and "cough" are considered curse words.

To avoid saying "corona", the Orang Rimba have begun using "cororoit" - an alternative now used conversationally by a few hundred people, according to Pico.

Born in Bukit Duabelas national park, Pico teaches advocacy and other skills to young people in his community, and moves between the forest and nearby urban areas.

His parents and four siblings practice a semi-nomadic way of life inside the park, regulated by customary laws handed down through generations.

Under these traditions, a relationship with the forest endures from cradle to grave.

When an Orang Rimba baby is born, the umbilical cord linking mother and child is buried beneath a newly planted tree.

When a tribe member dies, the community moves to a fresh area of forest, a nomadic tradition called "melangun".

"The Orang Rimba's connection with the forest seems to me particularly close," said Sophie Grig, a researcher at London-based Survival International, a group that campaigns for the protection of tribal peoples.

Fear of disease is also well established in a community where infections can spread rapidly.

Long before the COVID-19 pandemic, anyone returning from outside the forest had to spend at least 24 hours in quarantine under customary health rules called "besasandingon".

They stay in an isolated area downstream due to a belief that disease flows down water courses.

A common greeting in the group's language is to ask whether someone is healthy or ill.

When the Orang Rimba first heard of a new infectious disease spreading across much of the world in March, elders immediately tightened their existing quarantine rules.

Now Pico must walk for six hours to visit his family, who have retreated deeper into the forest in response to the pandemic. He last saw his parents about a month ago.

“We have to abide by *besasandingan*,” said Pico. “That means we have to stay 20 or 30 metres (66-98 ft) away.”

LOST LAND

Unlike Brazil and India, Indonesia lacks a dedicated government department overseeing indigenous affairs.

In 2015, President Joko Widodo became the first Indonesian leader to visit the Orang Rimba and has vowed to return 12.7 million hectares (31.4 million acres) of land to indigenous and rural communities.

Indigenous peoples have for decades been locked in conflicts sparked by expansion of the mining, palm oil and timber industries on their customary lands.

In April, a coalition of rights groups wrote an open letter to lawmakers calling for an indigenous bill of rights.

Rural communities across the archipelago are also pressing the government to implement a 2013 court decision upholding communities’ rights to their ancestral lands.

“Indigenous groups are the most vulnerable people in Indonesia,” said Andre Barahamin of the Indigenous Peoples’ Alliance of the Archipelago (AMAN).

“But, as long as we have sovereignty over our ancestral domain, we will be fine - we can save ourselves.”

Three months ago, AMAN wrote to its 2,371 member communities recommending they stockpile food and initiate strict social distancing measures in response to the coronavirus threat.

Just over half the indigenous groups AMAN represents enacted some form of lockdown, with most doing so before the central government introduced restrictions on movement in April.

Indonesia has registered about 47,000 cases of COVID-19 since the start of the pandemic and more than 2,500 deaths - but low levels of testing, especially in remote areas, mean it is unclear to what extent indigenous groups may have been affected.

MARGINAL LIVES

More than 2,500 Orang Rimba have lost their traditional land to oil-palm plantation firms, according to KKI Warsi, a Sumatra-based environmental nonprofit which carried out interviews in local language with tribe members for the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

Some live on the fringes of plantations, while the poorest beg along the highway linking the east and west of the island.

“The contrast between these people is so immense and tragic because you see how they would be living if they had not lost their land,” said Survival International’s Grig.

Minan, who goes by one name, lives with his wife and child under an old tarpaulin near the highway in Rejosari village.

“This was still a forest before,” he said in an interview conducted by KKI Warsi. “Then the villages came and turned it into their plantations and settlements.”

Robert Aritonang, an anthropologist with KKI Warsi, said the lives of those who had lost their land are “very marginal”. “If they take palm oil, they are perceived as thieves,” he said. Thirteen Orang Rimba had been killed since 1997 in conflicts with outside communities and loggers, he noted.

BACK TO NATURE

Orang Rimba members in self-imposed isolation in the forest today said coronavirus is reinforcing a customary way of life that had waned due to contact with outside settlements.

Neliti, 45, who lives in the forest and goes by one name, said trade with neighbouring villages had declined due to falling prices for rubber and fruit, while Orang Rimba are also afraid to visit nearby settlements due to the virus.

“They have started to revert back to ancient knowledge,” said Butet Manurung, founder of Sokola, an Indonesian education nonprofit that works with indigenous communities. “Twenty years ago, they were self-sustained, but a lot has changed.”

Sokola, which has suspended its work in the forest due to the virus, views the pandemic as an opportunity for children to focus on traditional learning.

“Every second in the jungle is a lesson,” said Manurung.

Orang Rimba elder Tumenggung Nyenong, 57, said the tribe’s retreat further into the national park was driving his people closer to the forest. “Hopefully the customs will be preserved,” he said in an interview conducted by KKI Warsi.

Teacher Pico can still visit his parents but, due to his frequent outside contacts, will not be permitted to rejoin the forest community until elders deem the pandemic to have passed.

“For the Orang Rimba, 10 years from now in Bukit Duabelas (national park), I feel it will be like it always was,” he said. “There will still be a forest and a way of life in the forest.” (Reporting by Harry Jacques; Editing by Megan Rowling. Please credit the Thomson Reuters Foundation, the charitable arm of Thomson Reuters, that covers the lives of people around the world who struggle to live freely or fairly. Visit <http://news.trust.org>)

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