

'People of the forest': Indigenous Indonesians stake claim to land

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Scanning the vast green expanse of tropical rainforest surrounding his village, Mino Nente noticed a pair of branches twitch in the distant canopy. The 58-year-old narrowed his eyes, raised a long wooden blowpipe to his lips, and fired a dart.

The rustling in the trees turned out to be a gust of wind rather than an intruder, but Nente and his Indigenous community on the Indonesian island of Sulawesi remain ever-vigilant to threats to their land from development.

“The forest is very important to us,” said Nente, an elder of the Wana Posangke, an Indigenous people that inhabit the central valleys and hills of Sulawesi.

“It is our lifeblood and we will fight to protect it.”

Like much land across the richly-forested archipelago nation, the Wana’s territory has come under increasing pressure in recent years as palm oil plantations and nickel mines have sprung up and expanded across the surrounding

But a government initiative is bolstering legal protections for Indigenous peoples such as the Wana, guarding them from land-grabbers and in turn helping to halt deforestation of the carbon-capturing rainforests inhabited by such communities.

In late 2016, Indonesia announced that it would return customary lands to Indigenous peoples - starting with 13,000 hectares (32,124 acres) granted to nine communities, including the Wana.

To date, the country has recognised about 153,000 hectares of customary forest for 108 communities, the government says.

However, some Indigenous leaders and analysts have voiced concerns about the land recognition process - saying it is cumbersome and prone to political interference - and questioned the government's overall commitment to Indigenous rights.

They said the customary forest initiative only came as a result of a 2013 Constitutional Court ruling that Indigenous peoples have the right to manage their ancestral lands, amending a law that had classified Indigenous forests as state-owned.

Separately, an Indigenous Peoples Bill, which was submitted in 2012 and aimed to fully recognise Indigenous communities' customary rights, has not yet been voted on. It faces opposition from major parties including President Joko Widodo's PDI-P.

"We're grateful the government is returning our lands," said Rukka Sombolinggi, secretary general of the Indigenous Peoples Alliance of the Archipelago (AMAN), a nonprofit that was involved in the Constitutional Court proceedings a decade ago.

"But it has not been given naturally or organically," she added. "We have had to fight very hard for this." Protecting natural resources and reducing deforestation

Despite the challenges, "there has been a lot of progress in Indonesia over the years," according to Willem van der Muur, a Jakarta-based land tenure expert at the World Bank.

"The movement to secure land rights has been key. A lot of forest would have disappeared otherwise."

Indonesia's policy is spearheading a global surge in support for conservation led by Indigenous and local communities, who manage half the world's land and 80 per cent of its biodiversity.

Their forests also store 37.7 billion tonnes of carbon - the equivalent of about 10 times the annual emissions generated by all industries and households in the European Union.

At the COP26 UN climate summit in 2021, several governments and private funders pledged US\$1.7 billion to support Indigenous communities in their role as "guardians of forests and nature", marking a significant shift from the past.

A 2021 report by the Rainforest Foundation Norway found that over the previous decade, less than 1 per cent of all climate adaptation and mitigation funding went towards projects to support Indigenous land rights and their management of forests.

Yet many studies have shown that when Indigenous peoples have land rights, they protect natural resources, and the forests under their care are less likely to be deforested.

Struggle for land recognition and rights

In the case of the Wana, who have inhabited central Sulawesi for generations, a traditional law called "lempa dua" - meaning "the balance of life" - forbids exploitation of most of the forest, other than small areas for subsistence.

"Nobody understands Mother Nature better than them," said Amran Tambaru, regional director of Merah Putih Foundation (YMP), a nonprofit that helped the Wana receive recognition.

In order to obtain customary forest recognition, communities must go through a years-long process of participatory mapping to avoid land conflicts - requiring the support of a local nonprofit - then enter negotiations with regional authorities.

But land tenure analysts say this gives regional politicians, prone to conflicts of interest, too much power - with no enforcement mechanism to regulate the process.

The Wana - whose application took several years to complete - requested 25,526 hectares of customary forest, but authorities recognised just less than a quarter of the land they sought.

"This local-national dynamic is partly why they [community-recognised forests] have not spread more," said Van der Muur of the World Bank.

There are 13.76 million hectares of potential customary forests across Indonesia - meaning that only 1 per cent has been recognised to date, according to the Ancestral Domain Registration Agency (BRWA), a nonprofit.

"If you compare this to the number of palm oil, mining and logging permits given, it's very small," said Sombolinggi of AMAN.

Indonesia has granted 23.8 million hectares of land to palm oil plantations, 18.8 million hectares to logging concessions and 9 million hectares to mining companies, according to Nusantara Atlas, an independent deforestation monitor.

Yet Yuli Prasetyo, deputy director of the country's customary forest programme, said he expects 50 other Indigenous communities to receive recognition over the next year, with the goal of all customary forest being recognised by 2030.

"We have been progressing too slowly," added Prasetyo, who has a team of just three people to process nationwide claims.

"But I have confidence we can achieve all of that."

'We hope that you listen to us'

The legal recognition push is making a difference - with companies having to win the approval of Indigenous peoples to operate on their land, said Agung Wibowo, executive coordinator of HuMA, a nonprofit working with such communities.

For example, Pamang, a Wana village chief, said his community rebuffed a surveyor for a nickel mine a few years ago.

"We are aware of our rights," said Pamang, who like many Indonesians has only one name.

"We know that this is a protected area."

In addition to recognising customary land, Indonesia is making ground on its attempt to slow deforestation.

A report by Global Forest Watch in June found that Indonesia - home to a third of the world's rainforests - lost 230,000 hectares of primary rainforest in 2022 - down from 930,000 hectares in 2016, and the second lowest level in two decades.

Elna Bastiansen, head of the Indonesia and Papua New Guinea programme at the Rainforest Foundation Norway, said this was due to a moratorium on forest-clearing permits, palm oil concession revocations and customary forest recognition.

"It shows the policies are working to some extent," she said. "Indonesia is giving more voice to local communities."

Indigenous-led conservation received a boost in May when donors launched the Nusantara Fund - a multi-million dollar initiative managed by local nonprofits - that is the first direct funding mechanism for Indigenous peoples in Indonesia.

In Sulawesi, the Wana and many other Indigenous groups are set to receive that support for their forest stewardship.

"We are the people of the forest," said Indo Mboa, a 59-year-old Wana matriarch, sitting at the entrance of her bamboo home. "We see mountains as bodies and rivers as souls."

"We hope that you listen to us," she added.

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