

The People of Bukit Lawang

Sumatra, Indonesia

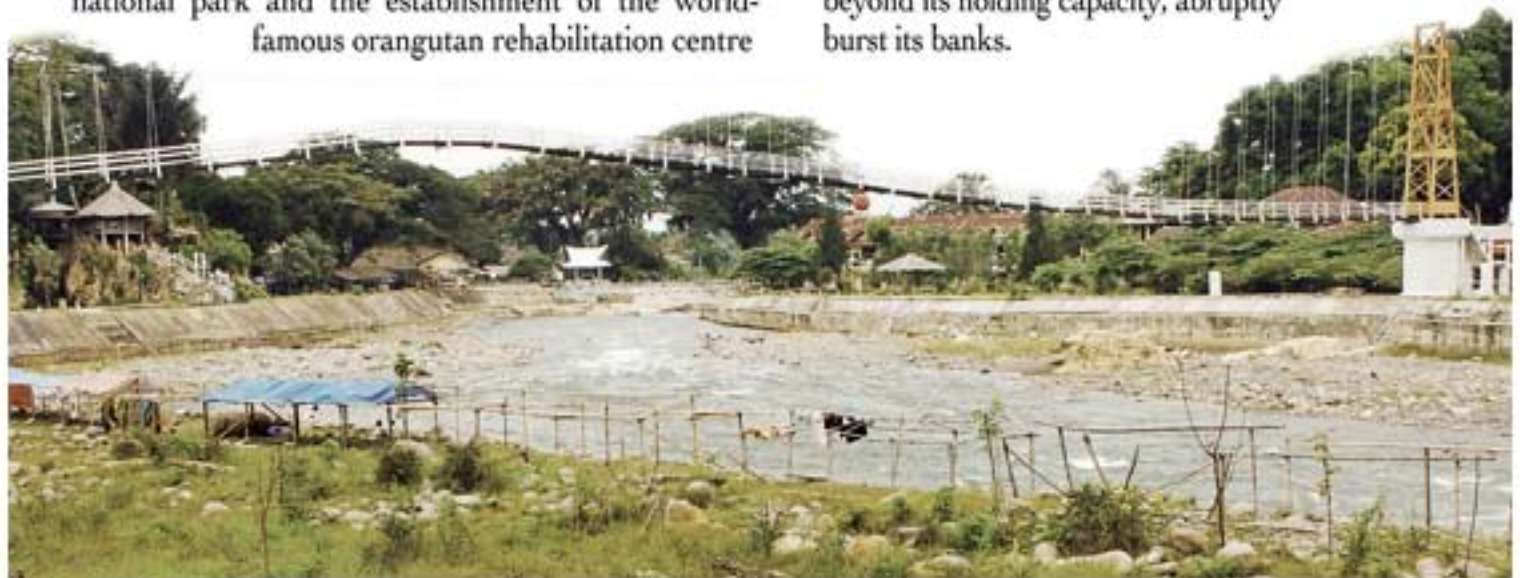
For two days it had rained heavily. Few of the locals along the Bahorok river in northern Sumatra showed much concern. Indonesia's riverside communities have grown familiar with flooding during the rainy season. This time, however, things would be different. On the night of 2nd November 2003, a massive flash flood swept through and devastated settlements along the banks of the Bahorok. The epi-centre of the tragedy was a small village, the tourist resort of Bukit Lawang.

For many the issues surrounding climate change, deforestation and illegal logging can seem inordinately complex; the human side - the personal stories - can often be forgotten. But occasionally these global problems affect one tiny area; and suddenly, in a microcosm, all the devastation and horror take on a very real human face. That night in 2003, the village of Bukit Lawang found itself thrust into such a position.

Bukit Lawang was a small village on the edge of an oil-palm plantation in Indonesia's North Sumatra province. Since the founding of the Gunung Leuser national park and the establishment of the world-famous orangutan rehabilitation centre

a mile upstream, the village had prospered through tourism. On that tragic night, in the space of a few minutes, Bukit Lawang completely disappeared. 400 houses, 3 mosques, 8 bridges, 280 kiosks and food stalls, 35 inns and guest houses were gone. All in all, 239 villagers including 5 tourists, were dead and 1,400 locals lost their homes.

When the worst of the flood water had abated and the desperate search for survivors was finally called off, the villagers found a disturbing sight surrounding them. Thousands of massive logs mixed with rocks and mud lay in ugly heaps along the valley, the riverbank, and the site of the village. Some of these piles stood more than two stories high. This suggested the tragedy was not natural but caused by logging in the national park. It was discovered - although stringently denied by the authorities - that loggers had felled several thousand trees in the upper reaches of the river and had been storing them in an artificial dam, before sending them downstream. Following the heavy rainfall, landslides from deforested parts of the park sluiced into the swollen river. The Bahorok, beyond its holding capacity, abruptly burst its banks.



'...I tried to save the older people, but I was trapped in the middle of the river. It was very dark and I could bear the cries for help. I had no chance to save my family, my dearest ones, my child, my beir. I was not strong during that time...the day after, I found my sister, my wife's parents, then my wife... that is the unforgettable moment. It will be my wound... I thank God he gave me my life. I pray to him for the people who died...'

Rabmad Nasution, survivor of the Bukit Lawang floods

The flood water roared downstream carrying with it a deadly cargo of logs and timber which, like battering-rams, smashed and flattened everything in its path.

The accumulation of debris has now been cleared away, and aid organisations and local authorities have constructed new bridges, reinforced the banks of the Bahorok and built a new housing complex on the higher ground. Slowly things are adjusting back to normality, thanks largely to the strength and spirit of the community. Village members share whatever aid they receive and work together without question. Despite the rich, often cheerful spirit of the survivors a deep sadness remains hidden just below the surface. It's the fourth year since the flood and Rahmad Nasution will be thinking about his life before the tragedy: his daily routines, the family he will never see again, and others who were lost in this close community. Rahmad's memories are unequivocally painful.

Since the disaster, something unique has occurred in the vicinity of the Bahorok river which could well send a message to other areas within Indonesia. The strength in community has led to a motivation among many villagers to finally put an end to illegal logging in their forests. With support from *Yayasan Leuser Lestari* (YLL), an NGO based in nearby Medan, the communities are forming organisations to help stop illegal logging in the national park. In the nearby village of Penampean local people have joined a volunteer ranger unit which patrols the forest.

'...the rangers in Penampean started after Bukit Lawang flood. Encouraged by YLL we established a ranger organisation to protect the forest. Many of my friends had been involved in illegal logging activities but now they think again: our forest is nearly destroyed. People have had a negative impact. So our ex-logger friends have joined the rangers to curb illegal logging in Gunung Leuser national park. Our purpose now is to re-establish eco-tourism in the village...'

Ponidi, Penampean village ranger



Bukit Lawang has slowly rebuilt itself since the flood. Along the riverside in the early evening, the village women launder their clothes, their children play in the slow swirling shallows beside them, and once again small restaurants, food stalls and guest houses ply their trade. The few remaining hotels are also opening and tourists are coming back. The orangutan rehabilitation centre has been repaired and visitors queue at the river crossing to see the great red-haired ape of the Sumatran rainforest. Bukit Lawang is open for business once more.

'...we started to organise meetings to make the community aware of the importance of eco-tourism, such as forming groups of (forest) guides... but the impact of the Bahorok flood has not been good for the tourist industry. If we compare today with the past, fewer tourists are coming. So our strategy is to promote the benefits of eco-tourism. This is being implemented in daily life. Eco-tourism will protect the livelihoods of the community as well as the national park...'

Didi Charamsar, executive director YLL

