
A Timorese Forest Struggle

How far would you go to protect your forest?

Villagers from Pollo community in South Central Timor regency in Indonesia have set a remarkable example, weathering years of bureaucratic indifference, enduring violence from thugs and embarking on an odyssey across their country's archipelago in search of support for their defence of local trees and land.

The story begins with a forest of the kind known in the local Celebic language as *kio*, used to provide wood and food for guests of the community. In times past, the *kio* was a source of deer, pigs, wild cows, firewood, rope and other goods, and boasted many large hardwood forest trees. Five clans prominent in the community (which in recent times has been subdivided into several administrative villages with different names) enjoyed common rights to the forest, including the Nabuasa, from which the community's *raja* or chief always comes.

In 1982 an integrated livestock project supported by the Australian government got approval from both the provincial livestock office and community leaders for 25 years of activities on land that included the forest. *Leucaena leucocephala* trees were planted on some of the land for cattle food, 14 rain-fed ponds were dug, and a contract was drawn up with local villagers. In return for being given a cow, each participating household would pledge to give 1 ½ calves to the Australian business, which would then distribute them to other villagers in order to build up a local herd.

In 1987, however, the Australian project shut up shop, and the contract reverted to the local government, which began to sell the calves instead of putting them back into the project. The project's ponds fell into disrepair, with only two today able to serve as water sources for people and cows, and after 1990 the cattle population began to decline.

In 2003, some of the officials who had inherited the project decided they wanted their own fields on the project's land. They hatched a scheme through which they would ask villagers to prepare parcels of land for cropping in return for the promise of cows. Soon a stream of villagers were visiting officials, bearing traditional *adat* offerings – fabrics, cash, chickens, pigs, sheep – in order to acquire cows. Some households could even get two cows in successive years by presenting enough *adat* offerings to the officials. As many as 200 cows per year were distributed in this way.

By the end of 2003, some 21 hectares of land had been cleared through such deals. The officials pledged that the land would be replanted to *Leucana* to feed the cows, but no trees appeared. At the same time, the regency-level forestry office undertook a 'forest rehabilitation' project on 150 ha of the project's land. Then, in 2006, regency forestry office staff arrived, announcing another rehabilitation project. Villagers – mostly from outside the Pollo community – were paid to clear still more of the *kio* forest. Among the tree species cut down were *Pterocarpus indicus*, *Sterculia foetida*, *Ceiba pentandra*, tamarind and acacia.

An additional 450 additional hectares of forest had now disappeared, and the impacts began to be

felt. One outcome of particular concern to the villagers centered on a set of springs that had appeared in 1999, which, strangely enough, flowed only during the dry season, making possible 50 additional hectares of wet-rice cultivation. With deforestation, these springs dried up.

In 2008, the situation worsened when GERHAN, a project of the National Forest and Land Rehabilitation Programme, working with the regency forestry office, embarked on another 'forest rehabilitation' scheme in Pollo. Loath to lose any more forest, Pollo's *raja* and four *amafs* (deputy *rajaks*), gave their consent to the plan only on condition that it was carried out on degraded land. But by June 2008 GERHAN was cutting another 450 hectares of good forest adjoining a local road to make way for new hardwood trees. As before, fires were set to clear logged sites after the big trees had been taken away. With so much forest having disappeared, many local people had had enough.

After visiting the regency government and assembly, both of whose representatives promised to investigate, 100 Pollo villagers filed a complaint of forest destruction with the regency-level police, following up with a trip to the regency's forestry office and GERHAN headquarters.

After three months of silence, the villagers then traveled to Kupang, the capital of East Nusa Tenggara province, taking their grievance to the provincial government and assembly there and making sure to take away with them a copy of the complaint of illegal logging they filed with the provincial police.

By December 2008 still nothing had happened. At a community meeting, the *raja* ordered seven of Pollo's young men to go to the Presidential Palace in Jakarta to see what they could do about the situation.

Vowing that "it's better to die in Jakarta than to die in our home," the young men – one of whom had never set foot outside the district – set out with a total of around US\$250 between them. Five of them paid a bit over \$20 each to stow away illegally on a cargo ship bound for Surabaya in East Java.

Before long the ship's engines broke down and the ship began to drift in heavy seas. Water washed over some of the decks. The Pollo villagers were frightened but told each other, "If God takes us, so be it. We are fighting for others."

After a while the engines were started again, but the ship now needed rerouting since it had drifted out of the shipping lanes. In the end it took four days for the ship to reach Surabaya, where the villagers had to huddle in a hidden room for two hours while the port inspector finished his rounds on board.

In Surabaya, the villagers had to buy food, and within a week their money was gone. One of the villagers, Niko Demus Manao, went to work humping 50-kilogramme sacks of fertilizer for a bit over three dollars a day, but was urged to desist by his friends who feared for his health. Some of the others got work as drivers, however, and the expedition was finally able to put together around \$55.

They then got in touch with a television journalist who had once visited their region. The journalist invited them to her house together with staff from the East Java branch of WALHI – Friends of the Earth Indonesia – who suggested that they seek help from the organization's national office.

On 5 January 2009 the team got on the train to Jakarta, standing up in third-class carriages for the entire 15-hour journey. Exhausted when they arrived, they collapsed on the Jakarta platform for a few

hours of rest. After then locating a relative who helped them rent a room, they called on WALHI, where three of the villagers stayed a week while they met with the Environmental Ministry, the Forestry Department and a member of parliament as well as the national ombudsman. The villagers also joined hands with community representatives from Riau at a protest at the Forestry Department office, and filed a complaint about illegal logging and forest destruction with the national police.

The Forestry Department said it had no record of the Pollo forestry project, but an MP from East Nusa Tenggara province, citing his duty to serve his people, promised a follow-up investigation. He did arrive later in 2009, but only to campaign for re-election, not to pursue the case.

By the time the villagers made it back to Pollo, the 450 hectares of forest subjected to the GERHAN project were virtually gone. And even three years later, at the beginning of 2012, no official action had been taken in response to local concerns, with the exception of a letter from the national Human Rights Commission to the subprovincial government and another from the subprovincial parliament demanding an investigation.

The struggle was far from over, however. In February 2009, following the villagers' return, Pollo residents began land occupations on the 450 hectares of roadside land that had been cleared for the GERHAN project. The objective was to prevent the government from returning, to use the land for houses and fields, and to replant part of it with useful tree species. A bonus was that occupying villagers could protect what large trees remained against human-caused or natural fires and guard against the banditry, murder and rape that afflicted this lonely stretch of road.

Four households occupied the land at first. Now there are 50, and some 365 additional families are still waiting to establish homesteads. The ultimate aim is to give each occupying household a 20-by-40 metre plot. Meanwhile, many of the pioneers are temporarily intercropping with the newly-planted trees on acreage outside their own household plots until the replanted trees are mature and the entire area can be divided up. Criminal activity along the road has ceased and at least one fire put out, but the occupants' crops are failing due to bad weather.

On 30 January 2012, the head of the provincial livestock authority held a meeting in a local field office with the regency head and other members of the regency government about reviving the old livestock project, whose contract had expired in 2007. With villagers from four local settlements present, they said that on 2 February officials would hold a followup meeting at the same place.

The villagers' response was immediate. On 1 February they began constructing a wooden barricade across the road to the field office. Their message: we want clarification of the status of the land in question.

On 2 February a vehicle arrived full of troops from Satuan Polisi Pamong Praja (Satpol PP), Indonesia's public order agency tasked with policing riots, protests and evictions. Niko Demus Manao was taken to a nearby cooperative for a 'heart to heart' conversation about the objective of the protest.

During his interrogation, more vehicles showed up. One car full of thugs recruited from the local layabout population, together with two motorcycle policemen from the local station, went straight to the barrier across the road. Advancing to the barricade, the thugs asked the 50 villagers present to disassemble it. They refused.

Another car carrying the head and vice-head of the regency, together with more toughs, pulled up at

the cooperative where Niko was being questioned. The Satpol officers went out to meet them, along with Niko. The regency head jumped out of his car, swearing at Niko. One of the thugs then put Niko in a headlock while another slapped and punched him in the face.

Wary of escalating the situation, Niko didn't call out to the other villagers, who were out of sight, to come to his aid. Instead, shouting out to them not to fight, he did his best to wipe away the blood on his face and ran to a nearby house. The thugs who had arrived with the regency head meanwhile took apart the barricade.

Niko proceeded to the regency police station to report the assault on himself, but the responsible officer was still at the barricade. Niko wound up filing a complaint at the provincial level instead, taking care to obtain a personal copy. Afterwards, the police summoned the thug who had punched him to get his side of the story, but he denied even being on the scene. Nevertheless, he was jailed.

On 3 February the Pollo villagers reassembled the barricade across the road, also planting banana, coconut and cassava on the site to demonstrate their commitment to their cause. By mid-February, rumors were circulating that the regency head and the thugs he had hired were planning to burn down the houses of the villagers most active in the struggle.

The Pollo villagers remain unbowed, however. As an ethnic Amanuban community, they are an active part of an environmental and social alliance linking communities throughout South Central Timor belonging to the Mollo, Amanuban and Amanatun ethnic groups, each of which was formerly associated with a traditional principedom. The Mollo, who live in the upstream area and know themselves as the 'daughters of nature', have waged a largely-successful decade-long struggle against marble miners who would have destroyed many of the area's distinctive mountains, and are also battling industrial tree plantations. The related Amanuban and Amanatun groups, who live downstream and are seen as the 'sons of nature', meanwhile face threats from oil development as well as mining and plantations.

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