
[The Indigenous Kinggo's Struggle to Defend Papua's Customary Forest](#)

The Korindo Group cleared Kinggo's Indigenous People's forests for its industrial oil palm plantations. Petrus Kinggo and other community leaders were persuaded to give up customary forest land with misleading and false promises. Now they are fighting against the FSC-certified Korindo, despite the continuous intimidation locally and internationally.

[This article is also available in Bahasa Indonesia](#)

Indonesia is the world's largest exporter of palm oil and Papua is the new frontier. Forests on the Papua Island have become the investment target of the moment, after forests in Sumatra, Kalimantan and Sulawesi have been already largely converted into industrial oil palm plantations. Various big projects have targeted the forests in Papua. (1)

Petrus Kinggo, an elder and member of the Wambon Tekamerop tribe, from Kali Kao Hamlet, Jair Subdistrict, Boven Digul Regency, Papua Province, is the leader of the Kinggo indigenous group that owns the customary forest in Kali Kao Hamlet. They have lived in these forests for centuries.

In the 1990s, the community's customary forest in this area was turned into a logging concession, given to the company PT. Bade Makmur Orissa, a subsidiary of the Korean palm oil giant, the Korindo Group. Taking advantage of the Group's strong relationship with the National government, it obtained a logging permit in 1993 covering an area of 462,600 hectares. Korindo controls more land in Papua than any other conglomerate.

The company cleared indigenous people's customary forests without the consent of the communities and has profited from the wealth of timber forest products. The indigenous people living in the area have suffered great losses, including their right to access and use their forests. Besides, they had and still have to confront the violence inflicted by the authorities. Consequently, indigenous people in the area reject and protest against the injustice and destruction of their customary forests.

The Korindo Group also owns another seven oil palm plantation companies in southern Papua, which operate in 148,651 hectares of forest areas in the Merauke and Boven Digoel Regencies. These are: PT. Tunas Sawa Erma POP A, PT. Tunas Sawa Erma POP B at Getentiri, PT. Berkas Cipta Abadi POP C, PT. Berkas Cipta Abadi POP D, PT. Dongin Prabhawa, PT. Papua Agro Lestari, PT. Tunas Sawa Erma POP E. This situation shows how corporations continue to reproduce inequality in regard to land tenure, at the expense of community rights and livelihoods and without any consent from communities.

One of the aforementioned companies owned by the Korindo Group, PT Tunas Sawa Erma POP E, obtained a permit for the development of 19,015 hectares of oil palm plantations in 2014. Part of this area is located in the Kali Kao customary forest territory.

Petrus Kinggo and several community leaders were persuaded to give up customary forest land. The Korindo company offered communities money (just 8 dollars per hectare) for what the Indonesian

expression calls as “*uang luka*” (“wound money”), which means money to forget about the company’s past ‘mistakes’ of cutting the best trees in the Kinggo customary forest area. This came with some sort of promise of welfare.

Petrus Kinggo and the residents of Kali Kao only later realized the negligence in providing support and signed the agreement documents. Little did he know that signing that document would give away the customary forest ownership rights and land use rights to the company forever. Besides, the customary law of the Kinggo community prohibits the transfer of customary land.

Petrus became suspicious when the company failed to keep its promises. He consulted with a legal expert who explained to him that the Kinggo community had lost their customary forest rights. Petrus and the community had to swallow the bitter pill. They felt betrayed and guilty at the same time as they unknowingly had violated their own customary rules.

"Korindo promised to return the land after it was used, however, it turns out that Indonesian law dictates that I have lost my land rights forever. We cannot and will not accept fraud committed by the company," said Petrus Kinggo in 2018.

Protecting Indigenous Forests

Betrayed and deeply hurt, Petrus Kinggo fought back against the Korindo Group for reclaiming the community's customary forest back. Petrus collected support from indigenous groups in the area, churches and civil society organizations. In order to reclaim their customary forest, Petrus mapped the customary area and held customary rituals to ban the company's activities. Petrus also went to the local government asking for recognition as a Kinggo indigenous group and urging the government to revoke the company's plantation permit, as those forests belong to the Kinggo community. Indonesian law can recognize indigenous groups and customary forests but it requires the local government's approval.

Several political parties approached the Kinggo indigenous community offering various advantages and benefits if Petrus supported the company. The offers were by all means rejected. Petrus saw firsthand the impacts of clearing the forests, which also resulted in damages to the soil and water, loss of local food, and extinction of Papua's endemic animals. Furthermore, indigenous people can no longer be independent with plantations companies in their territory as their lives depend on the assistance from these companies. The company offers employment but only with unstable temporary contracts.

His position towards the customary forest and his actions inspired other indigenous groups to do the same. He succeeded in forming an indigenous group to fight together to protect customary forests. The efforts made have succeeded in holding back the rate of clearing customary forest in Boven Digoel, the same Regency where the Kinggo indigenous community is located.

Despite the risks to his life and his community, such as attacks from Korindo Group's representatives, company supporters and state security forces, Petrus persisted. He was subjected to continuous intimidation, with the dissemination of personal photos, accusations of using black magic, threats of imprisonment without real bases and physical assault. The attacks aimed at getting Petrus Kinggo and the community to stop their activities to defend the customary forest.

Although these attacks were reported to the local police, the legal reports that have been submitted were not fairly responded by them. The local government seemed biased and was also not doing the

necessary to secure the safety of the Kinggo group. In response to this situation, the company has repeatedly denied its involvement despite of the plenty evidence that has been gathered confirming this.

Various civil society organizations have expressed their support to put an immediate end to the attacks on human rights defenders in Papua by the Korindo Group. The attacks against Petrus as an indigenous person and land defender are human rights violations. The state must fully protect him and the Kinggo indigenous community. The Korindo Group and its subsidiaries must respect and accept the people's decision to protect their customary forests.

The FSC label and Korindo: certifying deforestation

Many of the indigenous allegations against Korindo were investigated by the Forest Stewardship Council certification (FSC), which is supposed to guarantee that the wood products are sourced from ethical and sustainable companies. The FSC report into allegations against Korindo was never published, after legal threats from the company. An article from the media BBC however published some of the findings of such report.

The report, according to the BBC, showed "evidence beyond reasonable doubt" that Korindo's palm oil operation destroyed 30,000 hectares of high conservation forest in breach of FSC regulations; that Korindo was, "on the balance of probability ... supporting the violation of traditional and human rights for its own benefit"; and was "directly benefitting from the military presence to gain an unfair economic advantage" by "providing unfair compensation rates to communities". The report recommended unequivocally that Korindo be expelled from the body. But the recommendation was rejected by the FSC board. So the question is, what is the FSC certification really standing for?

Korindo Takes Intimidation Strategies to Germany's Courts

The NGO Rainforest Rescue (*Rettet den Regenwald*) is currently being sued before the District Court of Hamburg, in Germany, by Kenertec, an Indonesian manufacturer of wind turbines. The claim is based on a letter the NGO sent in 2016, together with other organizations, to energy companies Siemens and Nordex, informing them that they have business relationships with the Korindo Group, which is accused of wholesale destruction of rainforests and violating the rights of indigenous peoples in Papua and North Moluccas. The court case is a clear attempt to silence and intimidate opposition; but the contrary has happened.

A letter of solidarity in response to the lawsuit, signed by over 100 organizations from around the world, emphasizes how "instead of prosecuting the perpetrators, courts are increasingly being used to harass environmentalists." (2) The NGO has taken a strong position against the company's intimidation strategies, as it affirmed in a press release, "We will use the hearings to wake up the public and cast an even harsher light on the destruction of the rainforest."

It is evident that large-scale oil palm plantations only benefit large corporations and create an ecocide for human and nature life on Papua.

If these projects are not stopped immediately, there will inevitably be more destruction.

Tigor Gemdita Hutapea & Franky Samperante
Yayasan Pusaka Bentala Rakya (Bentala Raya Heritage Foundation)

(1) In 2010, 1.2 million hectares of forests in Merauke, Papua, were converted into the Merauke Integrated Food and Energy Estate (MIFEE) project which ultimately failed and created various conflicts and social problems. The government has recently re-planned a 3.2 million hectare Food Estate project targeting forests in the Merauke, Boven Digoel, Mappi and Asmat areas.

(2) Rainforest Rescue, [We will not be intimidated or silenced! – a declaration of solidarity](#), January 2021

(3) Rainforest Rescue, [Hearings open in lawsuit against Rettet den Regenwald](#), January 2021