

tong tana

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«The logging has changed
our climate»
Kelesau Naan, chieftain of
Long Kerong

«Defiance has proven its worth»

A visit in Long Kerong, a Penan village that has defended its forest against the loggers

Journey to the Penan

The Penan were waiting in the darkness. They had tied their longboat by the river's edge, at the foot of the slope where the headlights of our jeep disappeared between the leaves. They had been waiting for hours. Now it was time to express their joy in receiving the visitors from the distant country of Switzerland. As a gesture of welcome, we were offered rice to eat, first the new arrivals and then the reception committee – a ritual from the past of the Dayak people living in the rainforest.

Michael Leuenberger, the journalist, and I had traveled over logging roads for eight hours to reach the banks of the Selungo. Through an area which, until recently, was home to one of the earth's oldest primeval forests. Today it reveals a distressing sight of palm oil plantations, tropical undergrowth and scanty secondary woods. 56 logging trucks crossed our paths, thundering by and leaving a thick cloud of dust in their wake – each laden with the ponderous trunks of primeval giants.

Two young Penan guided our boat upstream through the pitch black night. Francis, who is fourteen, stood in the bow of the boat and maneuvered it with a wooden pole while nineteen-year-old Douglas made use of a simple outboard motor. We often had to leave the boat and push it because there was so little water in the Selungo. Suddenly we heard a splash – and a fish the size of a carp jumped from the tepid waters into our boat. Francis smiled at us and quickly caught a second wriggling fish with his hands. An hour



later, after arriving at Long Sepigen for a stopover, both fish had been fried and landed on our plates.

By foot to village in the tropical forest

On the following day we met with Kelesau Naan, chieftain of the jungle settlement of Long Kerong. «Our climate has changed,» he stated, «since the forest on the lower reaches of our rivers has been logged. This is the time of the year when we usually have the greatest rainfall, and now it has not rained for more than a month.» Long Kerong, a village of 300 inhabitants, is located at the confluence of the Kerong and the Selungo rivers, some 500 meters above sea level at the threshold to the mountainous region. Normally, the village can be reached by longboat. But because the river has so little water, we had to unload our baggage and go by foot for the next two kilometers.



As always when he is in the forest, Kelesau Naan took along his carefully prepared blowpipe, a quiver for arrows and the characteristically round container for poison. The valuable Ipoh tree grows here on the upper reaches of the Selungo and provides the Penan with the deadly poison for their arrows.

Wild boar, deer and monkeys can still be found in large numbers. And, under the thick treetop foliage, one can still hear the laughing cry of the hornbill, the increasingly rare heraldic bird of Sarawak.



Blockades against the bulldozers

The Penan of Long Kerong are aware of the value of their forests. The village is in the middle of a concession granted to Samling, a logging corporation with headquarters in the coastal city of Miri. When employees of the company tried to fell timber in their territory in 1996/97, the entire village turned to barricades. At first the Penan tried petitions and negotiations but Samling rejected all of them. A meeting between the elders and the logging company in August 1996 came to naught. Samling's acting manager appeared at a second meeting with members of the ominous Police Field Force (PFF).

But the villagers of Long Kerong were not about to be intimidated. At the beginning of 1997, when Samling was once again advancing towards their village, the inhabitants blocked the logging road and stood in the way of the bulldozers in protest at the destruction of their lebensraum. This time the company appealed to the military for help. The use of special forces against the blockade ended with fourteen injured and the arrest of four Penan on March 13, 1997. Nevertheless, the people of Long Kerong remained unyielding in their opposition until Samling finally withdrew and sent its bulldozers elsewhere.



The 300 Penan of Long Kerong live in the middle of the rain-forest, 250 kilometers from the nearest city.



**Welcome dance
by chieftain Bilong Oyo
for the guests
from Switzerland**



The devastation of the rainforest in the area of the Samling concession is incalculable.

Opposition by legal means

To prevent the loggers from making renewed advances into their territory, Kelesau Naan and the chieftains of three neighboring villages filed a suit with the High Court in Miri. The legal action taken against Samling and the government of Sarawak asserted that the Native Customary Rights of the Penan indigenous people have been violated. Based on detailed maps of their traditional lebensraum, the four villages are claiming an area of about 550 km² of jungle in the vicinity of their settlements.

The case is still pending and is being supported by the Bruno Manser Fonds. Until now, it has protected Long Kerong and its surroundings from another invasion by the loggers. The Court is expected to consider the case in 2006. In the words of chieftain Kelesau Naan, «If one considers it in its entirety, we Penan are claiming only a small piece of land. They should finally let us have it.» And he sums up the long years of rebellion: «Defiance has proven its worth. We are glad that we didn't allow ourselves to be bought by the logging companies.»

In the meantime we arrived at Long Kerong. Thunder was rolling from the nearby mountains and before we reached our quarters in one of the wooden huts it was followed by a torrential downpour. Our hosts were happy. A sudden change in the weather when guests arrive is considered a good omen.

Lukas Straumann

News in brief

Two Sago palms for Bruno Manser

In memory of Bruno Manser, who is considered missing and presumed dead, Bilong Oyoi, chieftain of the semi-nomadic Penan, and Lukas Straumann, director of the BMF, planted two Sago palms close to Long Kerong in the rainforest of Sarawak. Representatives of sixteen Penan villages and one nomadic family took part in the ceremony. After the trees had been planted, all participants received a commemorative certificate written both in Penan and in English. The Sago palm («Uvut» in Penan) is an important symbol for the Dayaks whose livelihood depends on the forest. The mark of the palm is used as a source of starch, and its branches serve in the making of blowpipes.

Conclusion of proceedings to ascertain that Bruno Manser is missing and presumed dead

December 31, 2004 marked the expiration date of the one-year time limit in which to submit evidence of Bruno Manser's possible whereabouts to the civil court of Basel. If no credible evidence of his being alive is submitted, Bruno Manser will be declared as missing and presumed dead by the Basel authorities. In all likelihood, the proceedings will be concluded in March of this year.

Substantial interest for the Africa rainforest

«The Secret War in the Rainforest», an event organized by the Basel Africa Committee and the Bruno Manser Fonds, welcomed more than 100 participants to Basel on September 9, 2004. They were interested in learning at first hand about the clearing of timber in the rainforest of the Congo Basin and the violation of human rights resulting from it. Prosper Nobirabo, the Congolese lawyer and representative of the «pygmies» who are especially threatened by the logging, was invited by the Bruno Manser Fonds to take part in the podium discussion. Three themes proved to be of an especially explosive nature during the course of the evening: the lack of transparency with regard to events in the African tropical forest, the total absence of consideration for the rights

of the aboriginal population of the forests, and the shifting roles of environmental organizations in realizing projects within a corrupt environment.

Swiss communities committed to the tropical forest: campaign gains new momentum

Since the publication of our last newsletter Tong Tana in the spring of 2004 (and the English newsletter in January of 2004), 32 communities have been added to the list of those which have committed themselves to respect the integrity of the virgin forests and to renounce the use of tropical woods from over-exploitation and from dubious sources. With the addition of the following, there were a total of 405 Swiss communities at the beginning of December:

Gams, Kirchberg (SG); Sattel (SZ); Lajoux, Fontenais, Le Bémont, Montignez (JU); Novazzano, Cureglia, Castel San Pietro (TI); Châtelat, Leuzigen, Studen, Merzligen, Worben, Finsterhennen, Detligen, Müntschemier, Rüderswil, Trub, Radelfingen, Walkringen, Brügg, Tschugg, Walperswil, Ins, Dotzigen, Erlach, Rüti bei Büren, Kirchberg, Wynigen, Evillard (all in BE).

Under the name of «urwaldfreundlich.ch», a new organization was founded at the beginning of October to accelerate the campaign. In addition to Greenpeace and the Bruno ManserFonds, which were former participants, the campaign now includes WWF Switzerland. Rahel Wunderli of the Bruno Manser Fonds is assuming responsibility for it.

Information is available under www.urwaldfreundlich.ch

Bruno Manser Diaries: Third edition is in print

Six months after the publication of «Tagebücher aus dem Regenwald» [Diaries from the rainforest] by Bruno Manser, a third edition had already gone into print at the beginning of November. The 4-volume publication, that includes many illustrations in color, can be ordered from the Bruno Manser Fonds for CHF 98.- (+ CHF 6.- for handling). Kindly submit orders by postcard or by e-mail: bestellungen@bmf.ch.



With heartfelt thanks for your support!

The team of the Bruno Manser Fonds (from left to right):

Christoph Wiedmer, Moni Niederberger-Manser, Rahel Wunderli, Lukas Straumann, Philipp Juelke, Michael Leuenberger, Nora Leuenberger, Roger Graf, Dany Endres, Michel Bovey

Impressum

Tong Tana means «forest» in the language of the indigenous Penan living in the rainforest of Sarawak (Malaysia).

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