

Local tribe wins UN green award

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An indigenous community in East Kalimantan has won a prestigious environmental award from the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) for its persistent efforts to protect its forest from being turned into coal mines and oil palm plantations.

The Dayak Benuaq tribe from Muara Tae village in West Kutai, East Kalimantan, is scheduled to receive the 2015 Equator Prize from the UNDP Equator Initiative in December at the UN Climate Change Conference in Paris (COP21). Their conservation efforts first began when the Dayak Benuaq lost 8,000 of the total 12,000 hectares of their customary forests between 1993 and 2013 to mining and palm oil companies. Members of the group claim this was achieved through underhanded methods including inciting conflict among tribe members and between neighboring tribes, with their efforts supported by the West Kutai administration. The local administration has deemed the tribe, which is now dealing with health problems and food and water shortages resulting from massive deforestation, as “anti-development” for rejecting a government request to give up their remaining 4,000 hectares of forest to coal and palm oil companies.

“We have been labelled by the local government as ‘doing the wrong thing’ with regards to our struggle.

Due to their stance, the Dayak Benuaq people have been denied access to clean water and electricity by the local government. “Ironically, the international community, in this case the UN, has supported what we have been doing for years to protect our land from being destroyed by corporations and our local government,” prominent Dayak Benuaq figure Petrus Asui said. Petrus, who will fly to Paris to receive the award, called on the UN to push Indonesia to stop deforestation in Muara Tae by asking the central government to stop the West Kutai administration from issuing permits for mining and palm oil companies.

Muara Tae is now the only village in Jempang sub-district that still has forest, as other villages in the region have lost thousands of hectares of forests to coal mining, palm oil and logging companies.

Muara Tae is now surrounded by the operations of palm oil companies PT London Sumatra Group, PT Borneo Surya Mining Jaya and PT Munte Waniq Jaya Perkasa and coal mining companies PT Gunung Bayan Pratama Coal and Borneo Surya Mining Jaya. For the Dayak Benuaq, protecting the remaining forest means protecting their livelihood. “All the sustenance we took from the forest before the industry came has now gone. What’s left is less than 1 percent of the privileges we used to enjoy,” Petrus said. Around 500 households in the village now have to

use water contaminated by runoff from mining and plantation activities.

“During the rainy season, mud from the oil palm plantations flows into people’s houses” said former village head of Muara Tae, Masrani, who was fired from his position in 2013 after rejecting the local government’s request to sign an agreement to give up the remaining forest. The local community has also replanted thousands of trees in areas that have been left barren by palm oil and mining companies.

The community also engages in mapmaking and advocacy work to secure their legal rights to the remaining forest.

In addition to the Dayak Benuaq, 20 other indigenous communities will be awarded the Equator Prize this year for their initiatives. Other awardees include two other groups from Indonesia: the Indonesia-Malaysia trans-border indigenous people alliance Forum Masyarakat Adat Dataran Tinggi and environmental group Kelompok Peduli Lingkungan in Belitung, South Sumatra.

The Equator Prize is unique for recognizing collective action, rather than individual achievement.

See more at:

<http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2015/11/02/1ocal-tribe-wins-un-green-award.html#sthash.ztbW2nXz.dpuf>