



For an Indigenous group in Sumatra, a forest regained is being lost once more

by **Barita News Lumbanbatu** on 27 July 2021

- *The Indigenous community of Pandumaan-Sipituhuta in Indonesia's North Sumatra province have started replanting frankincense trees in their customary forest after a company had cleared the land to make way for a pulpwood plantation.*
- *The community has been in conflict with the company, PT Toba Pulp Lestari, since 2009, which has led to numerous clashes and criminal charges brought by the company against community members.*
- *The government finally granted recognition of the Indigenous group's rights to its ancestral forest at the end of 2020.*
- *But the size of the customary forest had been slashed by more than half after the government earmarked some of the forest to be converted into large-scale agricultural plantations under the national food estate program.*

PANDUMAAN-SIPITUHUTA, Indonesia — For years, Ganjang, a member of the Pandumaan-Sipituhuta Indigenous community in Indonesia's North Sumatra province, has been uneasy about extracting frankincense from trees in a nearby forest.

The aromatic tree resin, used in perfumes and incense, has been the primary source of income for locals for nearly 300 years.

But in 2009, the frankincense forest became a battle zone when a company owned by one of Indonesia's richest families obtained a permit to clear it for a pulpwood plantation.

That year, Ganjang tried to defend the forest when company employees, accompanied by armed police, plowed into it with excavators.

"If you dare to shoot me, shoot [me]! I'm not afraid!" he said, recalling what he yelled at one of the police officers.

The conflict is one of hundreds, perhaps thousands, of disputes over land rights between local communities and natural resources firms in Indonesia, where agribusiness and extractives are among the nation's biggest industries.

Compared to many of these disputes, which can persist for years or even decades, the struggle by Ganjang's community might be seen as a success story. Following a landmark 2013 Constitutional Court ruling that struck down the state's claim to Indigenous peoples' forests across the country, Pandumaan-Sipituhuta became one of the first Indigenous communities to receive formal recognition of its territory from the government.

But although Indigenous peoples have since claimed tens of millions of hectares of Indonesian land as their own, according to AMAN, the nation's main advocacy group for Indigenous peoples, as of early 2021 the government had only [recognized](#) the rights of Indigenous peoples to their ancestral forests on 56,903 hectares (140,610 acres).

Now that the rights to manage some of their ancestral forest have been guaranteed, the Pandumaan-Sipituhuta villagers can go into the forest and cultivate the frankincense trees with less fear of facing criminal charges brought by the company.

Some 700 households in Pandumaan-Sipituhuta are now trying to restore the damaged parts of their forest by spreading frankincense seeds. Others, like Ganjang, are returning to their routine of going to the forest to tap the trees.

But even as the government has recognized the land rights of the community, the villagers must still pass through the pulpwood plantation of PT Toba Pulp Lestari (TPL), owned by Indonesia's billionaire Tanoto family, to access the forest.

One day recently, Mongabay accompanied Ganjang to the forest on his daily rounds. He had to leave his identity card at the guard post outside the plantation and ask for permission to pass.

After a half-hour walk, Ganjang stopped at a small hut where other frankincense harvesters were resting, grabbed his equipment, and got to work.

To extract the resin, Ganjang taps into the trees with a tool that looks like screwdriver. Four months later, the yellowish resin oozes out of the trunks for Ganjang to collect.

Ganjang manages 3 hectares (7.4 acres) of the forest. His plot holds 2,100 trees, which produce 150 kilograms (330 pounds) of

He sells the resin in the district capital, earning money to feed his wife, four daughters and three grandchildren.

While harvesting the resin, Ganjang also collects frankincense seeds scattered on the ground.

"We replant the seeds of frankincense trees that are in the forest," Ganjang says, adding that he does this to pay respect to his ancestors.

A history of struggle

The significance of the frankincense trees resonates in a local tale about a villager who was exiled to the forest because she was thought to have violated a traditional custom.

Years later, her parents returned to the forest, but couldn't find her; she had transformed into a tree. When they touched the trunk, a liquid oozed out from it, like human tears. This liquid, so the story goes, is frankincense tree resin, which locals use to concoct medicines and burn as incense.

The fragrance of the frankincense serves as a medium for prayer and is believed to be able to summon the spirits of ancestors.

"If those activities [of extracting frankincense] are disturbed or damaged by other parties without the permission of the locals, then they will be enraged," Roganda Simanjuntak, the head of the local chapter of AMAN, tells Mongabay.

This rage is palpable when speaking with a villager named Rusmedia Lumbangaol, who gets upset whenever she hears the name TPL.

Ever since the company cleared the forest to establish its plantation, she says, the villagers' harvests of crops such as coffee have declined, and pest attacks have increased.

As Rusmedia explains how the company degraded the environment, she squeezes the coffee cherries just harvested from her plantation. A tiny caterpillar crawls out of one. She says this never happened before the company entered the area.

Not far from Rusmedia's plantation is a shallow river with reddish water and a slow current. She says the river used to be deep and had clear water.

"This [change] happened after eucalyptus trees [for pulpwood] were planted around the forest," Rusmedia says. She adds the humus in the soil has been declining ever since the pulpwood plantation was established.

In the past, Rusmedia says, her husband could bring home up to 20 kg (44 lb) of frankincense resin each week. Now, it's just 5 kg (11 lb) per week.

The company's presence in the area has upset the locals, and occasional clashes have erupted.

In September 2012, a clash broke out between villagers, on one side, and the company's employees and anti-riot police, on the other side, as the company was trying to establish its plantation.

When she heard about the incident, Rusmedia says, she rushed to the entrance of the village where trucks were taking felled logs out of the forest, in an effort to block them.

"If [I] have to fall victim, I'm ready [dear] God," she tells Mongabay, tearing up as she recalls the incident.



The frankincense forest of the Pandumaan-Sipituhuta Indigenous community in North Sumatra, Indonesia. Image by Barita News Lumbanbatu/Mongabay Indonesia.

Food estate

The villagers' struggle started to bear fruit in 2016, when President Joko Widodo recognized a chunk of the area as the Pandumaan-Sipituhuta Indigenous community's ancestral forest.

A later participatory mapping process [found](#) that the Indigenous people occupy 6,001 hectares (14,828 acres) of ancestral lands, consisting of 3,935 hectares (9,723 acres) of frankincense forest and 2,066 hectares (5,105 acres) of village and plantation areas.

The presidential decree was further strengthened by a decree issued by the elected leader of Humbang Hasundutan district in 2019, which reiterated that the size of the Pandumaan-Sipituhuta forest is 5,172 hectares (12,780 acres).

That same year, the district head, Dosmar Banjarnahor, also issued a regulation that served as legal protection for the rights of the Pandumaan-Sipituhuta Indigenous community.

However, at the end of 2020, the Ministry of Environment and Forestry [reduced](#) the size of the ancestral forest to 2,393 hectares (5,913 acres), [reallocating](#) two-thirds of the area for industrial-scale plantation development under the Widodo administration's "food estate" program. The program aims to establish large plantations of staple crops to boost Indonesia's food security.

Dosmar said he was left in the dark by the decision, and thus caught by surprise when he found out from the villagers that the government had slashed the size of their ancestral forest. Dosmar's district administration, it turned out, had [failed to account for](#) the food estate program when submitting its proposal for customary forest recognition to the environment ministry.

Dosmar then called the environment ministry's social forestry director-general, Bambang Supriyanto, who explained to him that the reduction in size was based on an analysis done by the ministry's team on the ground. According to the ministry, there were no frankincense trees in the area earmarked for the food estate program.

In January, Dosmar said he had established a team to check whether the food estate program really overlaps with the customary forest.

Febri Lumbangaol, a Pandumaan-Sipituhuta villager, says it's regrettable that the environment ministry reduced the size of the customary forest.

"We're disappointed that the government broke its promise," he said. "We want our ancestral forest back intact."

Kersi Sihite, another villager, says he doesn't want the frankincense trees to disappear from their land because of the food estate program.

"Whatever and whenever, we will keep fighting to protect [our] customary forest without being disturbed by anyone," he says.

Source: <https://news.mongabay.com/2021/07/for-an-indigenous-group-in-sumatra-a-forest-regained-is-being-lost-once-more/>