Cyclops Story: Forest tragedy in Papua’s Capital

- Ajit Joy, UNODC Country Manager, Indonesia

Jayapura, the capital of Papua province of Indonesia is a beautiful town built on the edge of forested hills just before it meets the sea. The view form Jayapura is that of the vast blue Pacific ocean dotted with a few islands in the front, and rolling hills with dense green forests behind. These forests are the Cyclops which apart from encircling Jayapura, also covers its twin town Sentani named after a sprawling lake with several emerald green islands. The Cyclops forest covers a total of 21,000 hectare of land. The name Cyclops in Greek Mythology is a one eyed giant. Dafansoro is the original name in the local language, meaning a union between a mountain man and forest woman.

Jayapura is completely dependent on the Cyclops. All the water to Jayapura and the surrounding areas come from the innumerable springs born in the Cyclops forests. Cyclops is however under great threat today. As Jayapura grows Cyclops shrinks. Demand for land, wood and fuel is today met from the Cyclops. On a daily basis Papua is loosing Cyclops and that too right under the eyes of the administration of the Pro vincial capital.

After a 10 minutes drive up the hill from Jayapura, the tarred road turns to a dirt road. I accompanied by two officers of the forest department are at the place where Cyclops forests begin. The officers point to me the Forest boundary marking stone from where the protected forest starts. A house built in 1996 stands just in front of it. There is a whole colony of houses around. A little ahead, the protected forest has been freshly cut. Huge tress are lying about, most of them burnt for wood charcoal. This wood charcoal is the fuel for all the grilled fish shops (Ikan Bakar Warungs) and hotels in an around Jayapura. Martin Kayoyi, the head of the Papua Provincial Forest Department tells me that, “each time people eat grilled fish in Jayapura, they are contributing to illegal logging in Cyclops.” Pineapple bushes have been planted all around. Charcoal, is stacked neatly packed, ready to be transported. Some sheds have been constructed close to the fresh clearings.

They are the people from the highland, I am told, who are now clearing the forests of Cyclops. The people who stay a little below since 1996 tell me that their repeated requests to the new settlers not to cut trees and clear forest falls on deaf ears. They are afraid that soon they will not have enough water. Currently they have long pipes bringing water to their houses straight from the forest springs.

I want to see a good virgin forest part of the Cyclops and so my friends from the forest department take me to the Chandrawash Army camp, located in another hill of Jayapura. Curiously “Chandrawasih” is a very common name in Jayapura and all of Papua. There is the Chandrawasi Bay, the Chandrawasi Army Divion, Chandrawasi Batallion of the police, many shops with the same name, lapels on the soldier’s uniform. Later on I realised that Chandrawasi
in local language is the name of the bird called Bird of Paradise. The picture of this bird is all around. On the wall of the Governors office, in Army units, on posters.

Just beyond the Army camp you can see beautiful green hills with dense forests. This army camp is in the protected forest area. Maybe when this unit was being built, deforestation was not such a serious issue and perhaps that is why the Army could without a problem build a golf course in the protected forest area and use the name - no surprise, “Chandrawasi Golf Course.”

I now want to see the famous Chandrawasi, bird of paradise. I request my friends for a closer look at the Cyclops. They take me an hour away to Jayapura’s twin town Sentani. We take a newly constructed road Jalan Alternatif (Alternate road) from the army camp. This road has been constructed through Cyclops. Making a road through forest is suicidal for the forests because after that logging becomes easier, development invariably start on the sides of the road, shops come, houses come and soon more forest is lost. We see signs of that already as we drive to Sentani.

We are in another army camp. Surprisingly the army is everywhere in Jayapura and beyond. Camps small and big all spread out. This camp is in the surroundings of Gunung Ifar or the Ifar mountain. It is also called Tugu MacArthur. US Army General MacArthur from the Second World War fame had made Papua his Headquarters during the Pacific War. We stop near a huge Water tank which looks like a UFO space ship. We climb a ladder and look inside and the huge swimming pool like tank is full with water fed from two pipes bringing in fresh cold water all the way from the Cyclops.

The forest beyond are beautiful and we decide to trek into it. We follow the path besides the pipe. The climb is steep and the path very narrow. In the beginning the forest around the path has been cleared and the locals have planted cocoa and areca nut. Soon its dense forests. Friends form the forest department point out to the majestic Merbau tree, big in girth, straight and tall, reaching out to the sky for sunlight. Little Merbau’s lean and tall are growing all around competing with each other and the other trees for sunlight. Merbau the much sought after wood that has all but disappeared from the forests of Kalimantan is still around in the Cyclops. After an hours quick trek we are at the spring from where the water goes to the Army camp. Here we hear loud and clear the call of the Chandrawasi. We try to locate it but do not succeed. We hear several more calls but do not see this rare bird. But we are extremely happy that Chandrawasi’s can still be found close to Jayapura.

I meet Peter Kanmaria, the old but very active gentleman who works with Conservation International. He is of mixed Papua and Chinese blood. He told me his story. His father came from China in 1901 and first settled in Chicken neck area doing business in the birds of paradise. The feathers of this bird that rich European women wore on their hats was in great demand then. Even today though it is the national bird of Papua and a protected species of bird, it is hunted.
In short the three major threats to the Cyclops, the forest around the capital of Papua is encroachment, illegal logging and wild life poaching. If this is not seriously addressed the immediate threats are loss of water supply to Jayapura and the danger of landslides. Being the forest around the state capital, this should be a forest top on the priority of the government.

UNODC under its Norwegian government funded project on illegal logging, is working with the forest department, police and the community around Cyclops to conserve this forest.