Oil Palm Plantation: Tragedy in Papua

- Ajit Joy, UNODC Country Manager, Indonesia

Keerom is a district in the eastern part of Papua province of Indonesia, close to the border with Papua New Guinea. As part of a Norwegian Government supported project on strengthening law enforcement response against illegal logging, a UNODC team is in Papua, where the project is being implemented. It is a Sunday, and most of the Community leaders are in town to attend church. We get to meet and talk to a few of the community leaders.

Keerom is just oil palm plantations. We drove around and found oil plantations for miles on end. “Our story is the story of these plantations”, say the community leaders sadly, as we start talking, sipping cold water from Aqua bottles with straws. The leaders are now in the late forties and early fifties. If we were talking to a generation before, they would have said, our story is the story of these forests, I imagine.

The leaders say that in the early 1980s, the community, which is the traditional owner of land in Papua was intimidated to give their land to the Government, which in turn leased it to the oil palm plantations. When community leaders resisted giving the land, the military threatened them accusing them of being part of the Free Papua Movement (a militant movement for independence of Papua from Indonesia) and being against development. This is the argument used again and again against the local communities whenever and wherever they protest in Papua, they say. Keerom during those days was also a well known hiding place for the separatists, and therefore the government was keen that the forests that offered shelter to the militants should be reduced, the leaders explained.

“I was a boy of 10 when I saw all these areas being cleared by the plantation company.” Says the youngest of the leaders. “This was full of Sago trees. Now there are hardly any Sago trees around,” he adds. Sago is the most useful tree to a Papuan, sago obtained from the bark being their staple diet.

500 hectares were released for the oil palm plantation, say the leaders, but the company now occupy 50,000 hectares by manipulation in this part of Keerom.

I was surprised to see Keerom swarming with the military. As we pass each military camp the driver has to lower the car window glasses to show our faces. We passed the quarters and offices of PTP Nusantara II, one of the oil plantation companies. It had a military camp just adjacent to it. At a nearby location, Nusantara’s old processing plant and storage is now used as a military camp. The leaders say that the military offers protection to the oil companies.

Rajawali another company is now taking land from another tribe say the leaders. They have taken over 26,000 hectares. This is in the neighbouring Arso Timur district with Yeti being the
main area of focus for the new plantation. “The community leaders were taken to Jakarta and their sign taken,” says one of the leaders who is still opposing the take over of the land.

We try to understand the benefits to the local people from the oil palm plantations. After acquiring the land, each of the families is given two hectares each explain the leaders. The land owned by the company is called “inti plantation” and the one owned by the people is called “plasma plantation.” For a moment we thought that it is good if each family could get yield from two hectares. Then the economics was explained by the leaders. For the initial crop plantation they have to take loan from the company, for fertilizers and pesticides, its loan again. Further they are always forced to sell the yield to the company at the price fixed by the company. “As Papuans, who depended on hunting and food gathering form the forests, agriculture was alien to us,” explained the leaders. “We therefore were not too good in looking after our two hectares and therefore had to hire people from Java to look after the land for us, hence further reducing our profits.”

The land had been leased to the company for 25 years. Starting in 1980s, for a good part of the land the lease term is over. They are now being returned to the communities with old standing palm trees with most of its life over. What will the community do with the land now? Where is the capital to convert this land to something else. It will most likely now go the Kalimantan way wherein the oil palm will give way to mines to complete the story of degradation.

Since 1960 this has been a military operation area. Two policies by the government seem to be affecting this area.

1. Transmigration: Kerom now has a population of 50,000 and 26,000 (according to the leaders) of these are non Papuans. The migrants are now second generation.

2. Oil palm plantations.

Another respected leader of the area says, “the government and the military don’t understand the culture of the people here. They depend on the forest for everything, food, custom and religion, livelihood, even things like dance accessories for local festivals is got from the forest. They are united by and bound together with the forest.”

“Government thought of this people as backward and wanted to bring prosperity. They also wanted to stop the conflict here. But what has happened is a big disaster for the people. They are loosing their identity and culture. Migrants come here with a new culture and religion. Sago was the main tree and their staple diet, but now even that is gone. People are now having Padang food. Processing sago for food is the main source of food for many of the Papuan tribes, especially those living in the forests and hills. People were ejected from their land to give way to the plantations. Forests and their source of food destroyed. Future of the people is becoming a disaster,” this elder leader goes on narrating.

No single person in Keerom has had any benefit from the oil plantations the leaders say, as we continue talking well into the evening. The local community cannot manage the plantations as it
does not match with their culture and competence. If the situation remains the same, Papua will be Papua only in name. Oil palm plantations are very closely linked to the story of the local peoples repression. Linked to discrimination, injustice, indignity, and other issues of human rights, the leaders say.