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SOCP NEWS

SUMATRAN ORANGUTAN CONSERVATION PROGRAMME

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EMERGENCY BULLETIN

This newsletter is an immediate attempt to inform readers of the current situation in Bukit Lawang. More information may be obtained via the internet and other news sources.

Disaster at Bukit Lawang

Present date: November 5th;

Dear all, welcome back to SOCP news. We had planned a newsletter in November in order to bring you all up to date with what we've been doing on the project in the last 5 months. However, news from the quarantine and release sites must take a back seat this time due to the recent catastrophe in Bukit Lawang.

Bukit Lawang is the site of the original Sumatran orangutans rehabilitation centre, established in the early 1970s' by PanEco's President, Regina Frey, and her colleague, Monica Borner. Since those early days the small village of Bukit Lawang has developed into a thriving tourism resort catering to both Indonesian and foreign visitors wishing to see the orangutans in the area and explore the Gunung Leuser National Park.

As many of you will have heard there was a tragic loss of life there last weekend, probably eventually going well over 100 people, as a result of a massive flash flood that has pretty much destroyed the whole town. We therefore devote this newsletter to

providing some basic information about the disaster. Suffice to say though that everyone here is busy trying to deal with the aftermath and our hearts go out to all those who have lost family or friends (as many readers will also have done) at this time. We also wish to praise all those villagers, tourists and others that managed to do something to help save lives.

This photo gives some idea of the amount of timber that hit the village, carried by the torrent.



Chronology of events

From what we have been able to piece together it all started around 7.00 pm on Sunday 2nd November. We hear reports that the river began to rise slowly about this time and seeped over the threshold of some of the lower lying houses and café's. Despite this most of the villagers considered it to be nothing out of the ordinary and merely moved rice and other provisions to higher storage. Later, however, at around 10.00 pm

the river suddenly began to rise dramatically and a huge deluge of water came down the Bohorok river bearing hundreds of fallen trees.

Together, the water and timber pummeled the village for around 3 hours, finally beginning to subside around 1.00 am on the 3rd. Exactly what took place during those three hours is perhaps best left to the imagination and to those who experienced it for themselves but on seeing the results a day later it is clear that it was a terrible and harrowing experience.

The result

Many people lost their lives. At the present time the official figures are ca 103 confirmed dead, 15 currently in hospital with injuries and up to an additional 86 who are still missing. So far, non-Indonesian's account for 5 of the dead, all tourists from what we can gather (NB: On the 6th these figures are all still rising).

SOCP first heard about this at 9.00 am on the Monday morning. YEL's Bukit Lawang Cottage was relatively unaffected and miraculously the phone line was still functioning. In the last few days staff at the cottage have been functioning as a kind of operation's centre and have played an important role in communicating with outside authorities and embassies.

Suherry and Pak Sofyan Tan (Chairman of YEL) quickly went up there to see the situation for themselves and to deliver some basic, emergency food supplies. Most of our close colleagues at the cottage were unharmed though we are sad to report that Pak Sagiono, one of the security guards, is still unaccounted for and must be presumed dead. Pak Misyadi, another guard who was on duty at the time, has lost his wife and 3 children.

Remarkably, the Bukit Lawang Cottage is one of the few facilities still left standing and operational, having lost only part of one building and the bridge across the river. We hear that the hotel downstream (and also on the far side of the river), that was previously owned by a Frenchman, has also survived.

Both, it seems, escaped the torrent as they are on higher ground and also in the lee of the main bend in the river. Unfortunately this cannot be said of the rest of the town, which was located directly in the path of the greatest upsurge of water as it hit the sharp 90 degree bend and thrust over its banks at full force carrying thousands of fallen trees with it.

The view across the river towards what remains of the Wisma Leuser Sibayak. The Musholla and a couple of additional buildings can be seen in the distance, to the right on the far bank. Much of the rest has gone.



The area in front of the TNGL offices. The small cave is visible in the background. This used to be a bustling street of shops and rumah makan.



The majority of those that did not survive were either drowned or battered to death by the timber and debris. It is difficult to imagine a more terrifying and harrowing experience. Many also watched their friends and family's succumb.

As you can see from the pictures the village has been around 90% destroyed. Once the debris and buildings that cannot be repaired are demolished there will be very little still standing in the original site of the town. Of those that are still okay, the Gunung Leuser National Park office and visitor centre is one and parts of the Rindu Alam Hotel are another.

Part of what used to be the bus terminal



Further upstream, almost all of the buildings and accommodations along the narrow path to the orangutans station have gone. A few do still remain but at the time of writing we cannot be more specific.

The view across the bus terminal area from the TNGL office



The orangutan centre

We can report that the orangutan centre itself also appears to have survived

relatively unscathed. The Pongo Resort restaurant and one of the chalets near to the river have both been damaged beyond repair but the orangutan cages and their occupants seem to be okay. Suherry and vet, Drh Wardy, have both this morning set off to Bukit Lawang to try to get some supplies to the site, try to confirm what we have heard and to see what now needs to be done there. When he was in Bukit Lawang on Monday, Suherry was not able to get there but it should be possible today.

We will do whatever is needed to ensure the wellbeing of the orangutans and staff at the station and will of course try to keep you informed if we can (though suggest you also keep an eye on the internet and other news sources for updated information).

November 6th: Suherry and Wardy are back in Medan. Yesterday they made it as far as the opposite bank from the orangutan centre. We are pleased to report that all the staff of the centre, and of the Pongo resort are okay. All the orangutans in the cages at the time survived too. The staff evacuated from the centre the morning after the flood and before leaving, opened the cages so the orangutans can find food for themselves. From the reports of the rangers it seems the cages were engulfed briefly by the water. There is also a lot of timber strewn around nearby.

The orangutans have been extremely lucky by the sound of things. So far only one orangutan is known to have died. The corpse was found downriver in the 'pool' area near to Bukit Lawang Cottage. The individual is unrecognizable but was almost certainly an ex-captive asleep in a nest near the river when the flood occurred. *(NB: We just heard that a second orangutan corpse was also found but do not have any more details).*

As stated, the orangutans released from the cages are now free. Suherry and Wardy saw Muni and Sasha from the river bank. The others, Kimoi, Joni, and Abu were presumably foraging in the forest at the time. There is food available for them. Almost certainly they have already raided any supplies left at the ranger post or the Pongo Resort. It is also the fruiting season now so

the orangutans have a very good chance to make a life for themselves in the forest.

Despite this Suherry and Wardy plan to return there later today or tomorrow with equipment and assistance to cross the river and provide additional food for the orangutans. They will try to contact the rangers and set up a regular programme of providing food for any orangutans that remain near the station.

Long distance shot of Moni (centre) wandering around the station



It just so happens that Wardy and our consultant vet, Dr Hester van Bolhuis, gave each of the caged orangutans a thorough medical check only 4 weeks ago and all were negative for TB and hepatitis. They have also just been treated for parasites. Given this, we are confident that most will do okay but we will try to monitor them as much as we can in case any of them do not manage to cope.

As for the station infrastructure, the cages are all in tact and one building appears undamaged. All the other structures have sustained some damage but repairing some may well be possible.

We will let you know more about the situation and progress at the site in the next issue of SOCP News or another bulletin.

The causes

The local media has rapidly jumped on the illegal logging band-wagon as the main cause of the sudden flash flood. Reports are

mixed, however, as to the real extent of logging in the Bohorok river catchment itself.

For sure, for a huge flash flood like this it would seem that something had been holding the water back, and that it was suddenly breached, allowing all the water to descend at once. Potential dams are logs (either fallen or cut) or soil and earth (and trees) that could temporarily block the river after a landslide. It is further possible that both could occur at the same time and thus exacerbate the scale of the problem.

Fieldworkers who have recently been into parts of the park above Bukit Lawang say that further in, at least, most of the forest is in tact, although there is a large tract of young forest that may be the result of earlier logging or a natural landslide.

There are some additional reports that villagers themselves had actually created a dam nearer to Bukit Lawang to provide a pool for easier fishing!

Given the conflicting information available we must acknowledge that the root cause could be man-made but also that it could be a wholly natural event. We are helping where we can, however, and with others, to try and identify the ultimate cause.

For information, Gunung Leuser National Park covers around 830,000 ha and reports suggest that around 43,000 ha of this total has already been lost to illegal logging. This is despite the fact that the vast majority of the Park is mountainous, steep and relatively inaccessible. The Ladia Galaska roads project will of course change this, opening up huge areas to illegal logging if it goes ahead. The National Park itself also constitutes a major part of the larger Leuser Ecosystem (ca 2,500,000 ha).

If the Bukit Lawang catastrophe does eventually prove to have been caused by illegal logging activities within the Park it would serve as a timely reminder to those responsible or enforcing conservation and environmental laws as well as those in power and still pushing for increased forest conversion (e.g. Ladia Galaska).

November 6th: reports are just coming in that the cause of the catastrophe looks to be entirely natural and not related to any logging activity. It appears there is a huge area of ca 7,000 ha, over 10 km into the Park to the east (towards the Aceh border), that is heavily scarred by hundreds of major landslides "as if the steep mountain slopes have been gouged out by immense claws". Thus it would seem this is the result of an entirely natural phenomenon, brought about by heavy rains and steep slopes. It also seems that the slopes are still covered by strips of forest between the 'gouges' which presumably are now not as stable as they used to be. Reports also indicate that there is still a huge amount of fallen timber up river from Bukit Lawang too. We must therefore assume that a recurrence of the disaster is a distinct possibility, especially if there are more heavy rains. Lets hope this doesn't happen!

How to help

Due to a mounting number of enquiries about how people can help, both YEL in Indonesia and PanEco in Switzerland have taken action.

Funds to be donated to YEL can be transferred to:-

Account name:

Yayasan Ekosistem Lestari (YEL) QQ Bencana Alam.

Account number: 0270118531003

Bank Address:

Bank Niaga
Cabang Medan-Gajah Mada
Jl. Gajah Mada No. 11
Medan
Sumatera Utara
Indonesia

SWIFT Code: PNIAIDJA

Donations to YEL will be geared primarily towards the relief effort. They will be quickly used to provide basic essentials such as food, shelter and clothing etc. to ease the

suffering of survivors of the tragedy. Given that this account is in Medan, only 2.5 hours away from Bukit Lawang, donations can be rapidly converted into provisions and quickly delivered to those in most need. YEL already has numerous staff in Bukit Lawang helping with the relief work.

Funds to be donated to PanEco in Switzerland can be sent to the following account:-

PanEco account:

Credit Suisse; No 490097-11;

Ban clearing number 4791;

SWIFT code: CRESCHZZ84R.

Bank Address:

Credit Suisse
Bahnhofplatz/Postfach
CH-8400 Winterthur
Switzerland

All donations to PanEco clearly noted as "Flash Flood" will automatically be directed to a special sub-account. Donations to PanEco will be geared more towards providing assistance to the community in the longer term, to redevelop in a sustainable way, to protect their environment and thereby avoid future catastrophes, and to educate those that have no other means of affording an education. PanEco will be launching an international campaign from its website (www.paneco.org) in the coming days. Please look them up for further details.

Note: As stated, this bulletin is concerned only with Bukit Lawang, as a means to get word and some basic information out to others. We will try to put together another shortly to let you know how the SOCP has been getting on.

The Sumatran Orangutan Conservation Programme is a collaborative project involving the PanEco Foundation, Frankfurt Zoological Society, Yayasan Ekosistem Lestari and the Indonesian Ministry of Forestry's Directorate General

of Forest Protection and Nature Conservation.

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For additional information about SOCP please see:

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