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IRIAN JAYA AND EPPAWELA: The Rape of the Good Earth and its People

by Rohan Wijesinha

"Oh! Mother, I'm going to die. We are going to die. We are going to die."

This is a song of the jungle people of Irian Jaya (formerly West Papua) sung on an absorbing documentary made by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) earlier this year. Aired on its "Four Corners" series, and ably researched and presented by Mark Davis, it relates to the twenty-year struggle that the indigenous jungle people of this region have had since Freeport (US), with Rio Tinto (UK & Australia), opened their gold and copper mines there, the largest in the World.

Like Lambs to the Slaughter

Irian Jaya was an area of mystery until the 1960's when contact was first made with its indigenous people. The United Nations gave this area of unique tropical jungle and culture to Indonesia. This was despite the fact that the people who lived here, like the people of East Timor and Aceh, had little or no cultural connection to their new overlords. Gold had been discovered there, an element of little value to the hunter-gatherer people who had lived there for centuries. But for the developed world, and the West...

Kelly Kwalik is one of the most wanted men in Indonesia. He is the Head of the Free West Papua Movement (OPM). For over twenty years he and about a thousand of his tribe have been wandering the jungles of Irian Jaya, avoiding thousands of Indonesian troops that have been searching for them. Any that are caught are rarely seen again.

In 1977, a series of protests took place across the region, with the raising of the West Papuan flag. The Freeport mine was attacked and shut for a week, and an Independence flag raised there. The Indonesians responded with a series of bombings of the jungle villages, killing indiscriminately.

It is alleged that as many as five thousand (5000) people have been killed since the mine was opened. Fiercely guarded by the Indonesian army, and in an area of limited access, the media are prevented from visiting it. Allegations of rape, torture and murder abound.

Desperate Actions

Kelly Kwalik and the OPM had no way of getting their pleas for help to the outside World. They were desperate. Thousands of displaced tribesmen, women and children were starving in the jungles.

They resorted to the only way that they saw possible to get the attention of the World. They kidnapped a group of researchers, some Indonesian, some Western.

"We took the researchers as hostage because we had no other way for our cause to be acknowledged".

With hostages, they were able to make some demands, and more importantly, have their plight heard by the foreign media.

For a short time they were able to get food, medicine, and assistance from the ICRC, and other humanitarian agencies. The Indonesian army held back.

This was a short respite. Two of the hostages, Indonesians, were killed, not by the OPM, but by outraged villagers seeking revenge for the many slaughtered by the Indonesian troops.

The ABC documentary then outlines a series of outrageous actions, of deceit, murder, and genocide, with the use of mercenaries, Freeport helicopters, and ICRC complicity, not only to free the remaining hostages, but also to murder even more of the indigenous peoples.

Last Stand

They are still out there, the Ndugas, the Amungme and the Danis, facing the heavily armed Indonesian forces with nothing but their bows and arrows. They survive on what they can find in the jungle, often eating leaves for sustenance. They have courage; the courage borne of the intimate tie they have with their land. They are fighting to protect it - the good earth of Irian Jaya.

Kwalik says that this year may be their last stand. The displaced people of Irian Jaya sing,

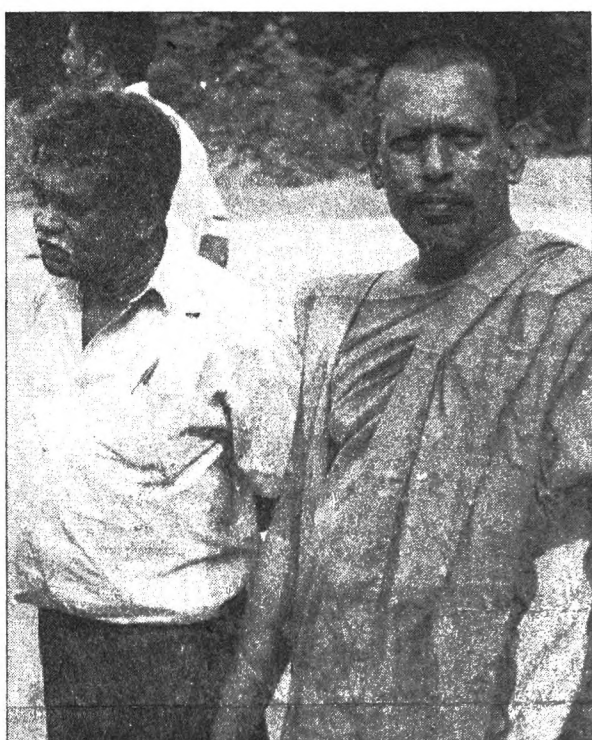
"Before, I could walk free. Now I am confused. Where can I go? Every path I take, all I find is sufferings.

When I feel hungry. When I thirst for sweetness, it is too hard to find. We face a bitter path. It is the pain of us orphans."

Closer home

In Sri Lanka, at Eppawela, IMC Agrico, an offshoot of Freeport, and the Tomen Company of Japan, are bidding for the mining rights to the deposits of Phosphate there. There are limited such deposits left in the world - about fifty years supply at present levels of extraction. At Eppawela, Lanka Phosphate has been extracting the precious deposits for the local market, for its conversion to fertiliser for tea, rubber and coconut. Their extraction methods are environmentally friendly, and more importantly, it is estimated that at the present rate of extraction these deposits of Phosphate will last a further two hundred years!

However, the Government, against the advice of the foremost scientists in the Island, have decided to sell out to IMC Agrico, despite the fact that the deal will not economically benefit this Country. There will be vast environmental damage, and the deposits of



Phosphate will all be extracted within thirty years! So much for saving for the future.

There is an island called Nauru in the South West Pacific that was once rich in phosphate. It had the highest per capita income in the World. A few decades later, deposits depleted and land despoiled; it is bereft of an economy. A once rich people starve and seek escape.

Digging up the past

There is much local opposition to the project, an opposition that is seeking legal remedy in a ground breaking action in the Supreme Court. Seven residents of Eppawela are appealing for the right to know what the Government, and the companies concerned, are planning for their traditional homeland. And why do they want to know?

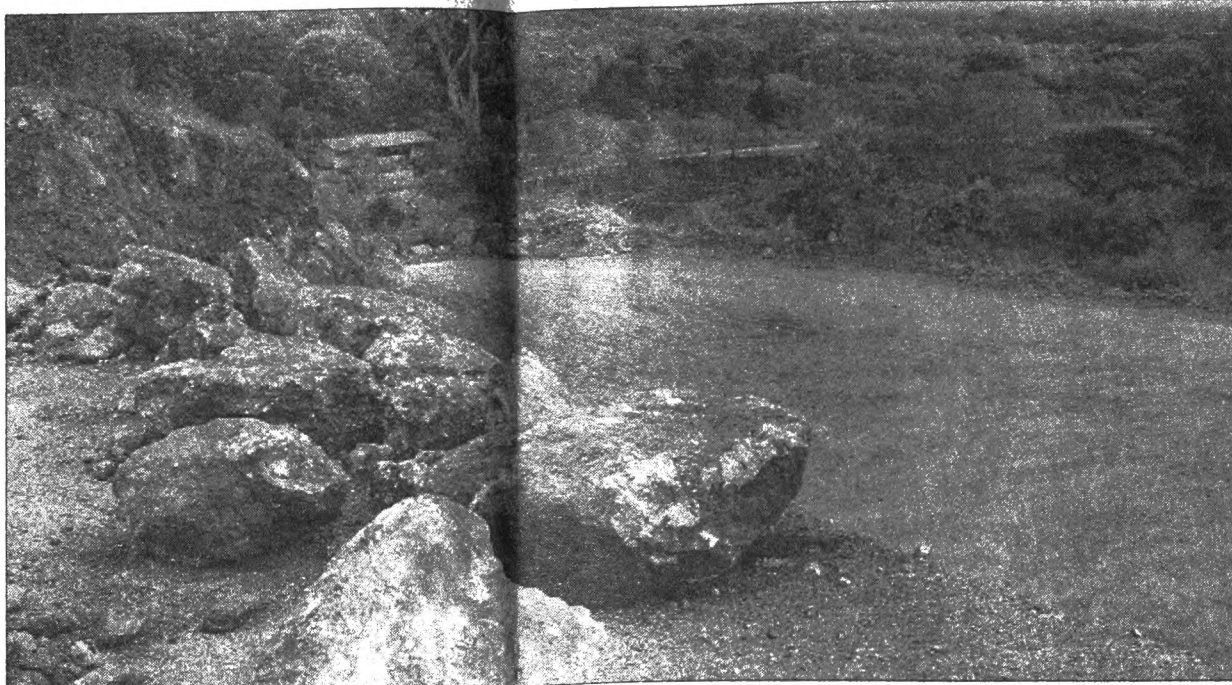
Eppawela lies in the heart of the richest agricultural and archaeological inheritance from that golden age of Sri Lanka history, the Anuradhapura Kingdom. Through it flows the famous Jaya Ganga (the Yoda Ela), watering the fields along its banks at a negligible gradient.

The Ancients knew about the rich phosphate deposits that lay beneath their feet. And they exploited it. Not by exhausting it within a short period of time, but by eking out its valuable fertilising properties for two millennia. The Phosphate slowly leaches out into the waters of the Jaya Ganga and is then deposited downstream, to areas of lesser deposits, thereby enriching even more land.

Every hole that is dug strikes shards of pottery dating from these glory years - relics of a once proud and prosperous agrarian kingdom.

There are seven ancient temple in the area demarcated for mining, 56 square kilometres now, buffer zones and protection zones and eventual expansion rights, this area could extend to a mammoth 800 square kilometres. Add to that the many acres that are being taken for a processing plant in Trincomalee resulting in a substantial chunk of the North Central and North Eastern Provinces being given to a foreign multi-national. It has happened before. The Dutch East India Company, and then the British East India Company. In 1815, the Kandyan nobility believed the British lies and sold out. We know how the following generations paid for it! One hundred and fifty years of national servitude!!

All the people who live in this area will have to be relocated, about twelve thousand (12,000) in all. The waters of the Jaya Ganga will be polluted and less than carry life in its waters on



its age-old course, it will spread the poisonous effluvium of exploitation.

A common struggle

Culturally, the people of Eppawela are very different to those of Irian Jaya. Some of the temples of Eppawela have a recorded history of over five hundred years. The people of Irian Jaya, a hunter-gatherer stock, carry their wealth of knowledge in memory, an oral tradition as rich and ancient as anything written. Yet they both have a great love for the land that has nurtured their people through the centuries. And this has brought them similar dangers.

If IMC Agrico is allowed to mine in Eppawela, the descendants of the people who have lived here for centuries will face the same threats to survival as do the Ndugas, Amungme, and Danis. Their rich traditions will disintegrate, and they will be exiled to disappear into cultural oblivion.

Who will be responsible?

What of the US Government? After all it is a US Company that is planning this environmental and cultural desolation. The official line of the US Ambassador is that this is a matter between the Sri Lanka Government and IMC Agrico.

How convenient? It seems that the self-styled Defenders of World Peace are quite content to watch one of them grab a piece of the World, and still keep conscience clear. Yet, I am certain that they would not have any hesitation in sending in the Marines, if say terrorists or "patriots" attacked Freeport's proposed processing plant in Trincomalee!

How doubly convenient!

Are we to believe that this US Company has not been assisted by facilitating contacts, giving advice, arranging visas, etc.?

Who will be responsible? In instances like Eppawela inaction amounts to the same thing as positive support.

Irian Jaya, like Vietnam and Cambodia will come back to curse and haunt the US. Perhaps it is no surprise to find that Henry Kissinger is one of the foremost lobbyists for the Freeport companies in US Government circles! What of the Sri Lankan Government?

No easy target

Irian Jaya was easy to exploit. Isolated and remote, its people subject to one of the most brutal and corrupt regimes of modern times, mercenaries, machine guns, and mining soon overwhelmed the gentle people. Professor Jeffrey Winters, a US political economist at North West University near Chicago, has produced several publications exposing the bribery that took place of high officials in the Subarto Government. These revelations resulted in his life being threatened. It is sad to think that the agents of Freeport assess that the administration in Sri Lanka is ready to assist them in similar skullduggery.

It is not going to be that easy for them in Eppawela. The people here have greater access to the media, have the determined strength of their ancient forbears, and have outstanding leadership.

The Ven. Mahamannakadawata Piyarathana, who is co-ordinating the "Fight to Save Eppawela Phosphate" campaign, has been described by Mr. Bala Tampoe, the head of the Ceylon Mercantile Industries and General Workers Union (CMU), as "The greatest leader I have met in 50 years of Trade Unionism".

He receives daily threats by telephone, has unmarked cars driving past

his temple at night, and has mysteriously been demoted from his high rank within his Order. This has done nothing to reduce his high standing among the people. Good leadership is all about courage in the face of extreme adversity, courage and foresight.

Five thousand (5000) residents of Eppawela marched in protest on the streets of Colombo, and as many have demonstrated at Eppawela, on several occasions, against this "sell out". In Eppawela, villagers flocked to the school playground to prevent a helicopter full of foreign officials from landing there and visiting the mine site. Eventually they had to obtain police escort to reach their goal.

In another incident, at Kadigawa, a businessman obtained 50 acres of land and tried to evict the residents on it. His purpose, to privately mine the area. There was such an outrage at his actions that he was prevented and seen off the area.

Peculiar public relations

In Colombo, journalists who have opposed the exploitation of Eppawela have been threatened. A National

cruel person. This is an absolute lie. The truth is I am a true patriot fighting for my country of West Papua. I regard Freeport and the government and military of Indonesia as criminals, thieves, oppressors, rapists, destroyers of all life and violators of all laws.....

Even though we wear penis gourds and torn shirts, we have the brains God gave to us all".

A fight to the end

The people of Eppawela have brains too. They will not stand by and await the insulting attempts by these foreign companies to exploit them. They have the backing of the CMU and other worker unions. It is refreshing to see that these organisations admit a social and environmental responsibility, as well as that of improving working conditions and rights. They are to be lauded for this, and for their courage.

Perhaps the greatest insult that Freeport's agents have inflicted on Sri Lanka is naming its local cover company "Saraboomi", the "Good Earth". This is sacrilege. They have planned the rape of Sri Lanka's good earth and of its people. Saraboomi indeed!!

Consistent with a teacher and priest of a non-violent religious philosophy, the Ven. Piyarathana leads the people of Eppawela in peaceful, but determined, protest. They have promised to lie down in front of any bulldozer sent to start the mine, or to evict them. The "Gantara", the temple bell, will ring out from his temple, and from the others near Eppawela, in ancient alarm, calling the people to face this modern menace.

The onus will then be, on the Government either to perpetrate violence against its own people, on behalf of this foreign multi-national, or to defend its people against exploitation.

We earnestly hope that sense will prevail long before that, and a better deal for Sri Lanka is negotiated.

The Ven. Piyarathana, in Gandhian terms says, of the people of Eppawela and of himself,

"We will not kill, but we will die".