

Indonesia: Evicted Community in Jakarta Moves Forward

Von Edith Koesoemawiria

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Standing together, Bukit Duri evicted residents are steadfast with their class action suit demanding full compensation and damages. Court declares eviction illegal.

Jakarta: A group of young journalists rushed down the stairs into a room filled with several residents and a handful of workers, volunteers, lawyers and architects at the newly rented Ciliwung Merdeka community house. The previous community house was torn down October 2016 in a massive eviction of neighborhoods in Bukit Duri and Kampung Pulo which begun end of September. Altogether 440 families in Bukit Duri and 518 families in Kampung Pulo were evicted in 2016.

The reporters are beginners at a major English-language newspaper in Indonesia. Several media outlets have a running cooperation with the NGO, Ciliwung Merdeka, where newbies spend several days living in homes of Bukit Duri families. It is part of their journalistic training and many have written about the eviction. Media had reported 550 army and police were mobilized to secure the eviction. Bulldozers were sent in. School children came home to waiting mothers sitting in rubbles. Forced eviction is never humane.

In the meantime (5/1/17) a panel of judges at the Jakarta State Administrative Court (PTUN)

had declared the eviction illegal and ordered the Jakarta administration to revoke the eviction notice. The city administration though has appealed the decision. Unfortunately cases where earlier court decisions are overturned by a higher court, is not unprecedented.

Jakarta's current administration categorizes the evictions as part of the program implemented to improve the city. Incumbent governor Basuki Tjahaja "Ahok" Purnama maintains it was not eviction, but relocation. In fact, the city administration had prepared several low budget modern looking apartments in other parts of the city. Along with infrastructure modernization, the incumbent governor had pledged to give better service to residents, end corruption, manage traffic problems and floods. It is not an easy job. Indonesia's 10 million person capital is a megacity. It is tough, politicized and often insensitive with a rift between rich and poor that stabs the eye.

Residents were told they would get 3 months free lodging and had to fulfill general requirements. Residents had to show proof of a monthly salary and letter from one's employer, open an

account in the city's Bank DKI and deposit a first three month rent. Being mostly self-employed, many residents could not fulfill the requirements. Getting an apartment also meant signing an agreement to waive compensation.

Many residents readily signed up and relocated, accepting the deal and have no wish to return to Bukit Duri. Others have regretted the choice, besides the inability to cover monthly payments, Bukit Duri was home.

Some Ciliwungs riverside neighborhoods are slums. The river is Jakarta's dirtiest, contaminated by industrial sewage, clogged with garbage dumped by city dwellers. Each time the river overflowed poor communities in the area were the first to bear the brunt. Yet Bukit Duri has existed since the 1920s and these communities have lived there for generations in tight and close knit communities. The communities are resilient and proud. They know how to live with the river. As soon as the river rumbles and rises, they move documents and goods to an upper level, for safety. Then resume work immediately as each flood recedes.

About 1 kilometer from their previous homes, twenty families — 96 men, women and children — live in a less than eight hundred square meter two storied house on a corner of Kampung Melayu. Six weeks after the eviction, the atmosphere was friendly but painful. Some tenants told jokes at the small food stall in the parking lot.

The cook also a former resident of Bukit Duri had initially moved to Bogor, a city just south of Jakarta proper. But, as her neighbor Bang Jut told her about new quarters and a possible income, she returned. "I lived in Bukit Duri for more than two decades, when I returned to Bogor there was really no one I knew anymore. I was alone, moping without anyone to talk to. Here I am with friends, I have a life."

Bang Jut misses the small garden at his old home and in this new place had just begun to plant tomato seeds in found cans. He explained that not all the tenants cook. The food stall was a help for them all. Heavy set with much experience, Bang Jut tells how the tenants are dealing with the stress. Some have completely

changed. A nice young man, once a quiet type had turned extremely emotional, easily enraged and would pick fights with anybody. He pointed to an 86 year old woman sitting listlessly, hunched near his pot of tomatoes. She was still unable to converse, having lost her sole income from renting rooms. She ate only when other tenants coaxed her. He said that all who have proof of land ownership are standing together, steadfast with their class action suit demanding full compensation and damages. In view of the situation Bang Jut is relieved that many have begun to joke and laugh again. "Come what may, we will appeal any unjust decision", said Heri a 57 year old evictee born in Bukit Duri, determined but smiling.

A total of 93 families are taking part in the class action. They are demanding 1,7 trillion rupiahs (ca. 120 million Euros) for the eviction and 104 million rupiahs (7.200,00 Euros) for immaterial damage. The city has criticized the exorbitant sum demanded, while residents allege the city had devalued land price in Bukit Duri and Kampung Pulo previous to the eviction in order. Thus making the area unattractive for residents and limiting the compensation amount to be paid in an eviction.

A recent paperback "Die Beste plek ter wereld" (The best place in the World) by Roanne van Voorst, published in February 2016, tells the story of living in Bukit Duri. The Dutch ethnologist lived there for a year. Together with the community, she experienced the hardships, creativity and their unending will to attain a better life. Van Voorst also learnt how humor sustained the community in facing daily challenges.

Having worked in the area for more than 20 years, Ciliwung Merdeka is still working with the Ciliwung riverside community and neighboring Condet community, and have begun new programs and activities. One of them is a community based saving plan for land ownership. Earlier on October 16, 2012, the Bukit Duri community assisted by academicians and practitioners of the City Kampung (Urban Village) Forum had come up with environment and community sensitive housing designs. With a team of volunteers, Sandyawan Sumardi, director of Ciliwung Merdeka has been searching for land to buy and a possible Public Private Partnership

to realize this dream. “We have knowledge, talent and have the will to develop, we wish for government support and facilitation,” Sumardi said.

Following gubernatorial elections on February 15, 2017, in which the incumbent governor won over his two rival candidates, warnings that Jakarta would be inundated spread through local media. An overflow of the Ciliwung River was to be expected by morning the next day because of heavy rain both in the higher elevated neighboring city of Bogor and in the capital. Jakarta had been seeing a week of mostly rain, with storms in the last 3 days. Sure enough on February 16, neighborhoods around the Bogor-Jakarta waterway — the Ciliwung and Cipinang rivers — were flooded between 10 cm to 150 cm, families required evacuation assistance.

Under critic for the administration’s river normalization policy as a flooding prevention solution, Jakarta governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama reminded that the project was not yet completed, partially because of legal actions against the relocations. Sending in pumps, generators and help, the governor had mostly fulfilled his promise of overcoming the current floods within 12 hours.



Basuki Tjahaja Purnama won Jakarta’s first election round with a slim 42,91 %, removing one of the two rival candidates who campaigned that there would be no more evictions in Jakarta. A second round of elections in Jakarta is scheduled for April 2017, because the minimum 50 % of the votes for an absolute win was not fulfilled. Rival Jakarta governor candidate Anies Baswedan acknowledges the need for consultation with residents in Jakarta’s development process, although he may have to back track his no eviction campaign as the megacity grows. The hope remains that both candidates offer better support, facilitate better dwellings and negotiate fair conditions for those who have and may still face eviction.

*Be Careful!
Jakarta’s
project to
normalize the
Ciliwung river
(Photo: © Jilan
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