

## **Parabola After Minamata Uproar**

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Jakarta – Saturday (September 2, 2006) about 11.00 central Indonesian time it was blazing hot. From afar Buyat Pante village looked quiet and uninhabited, as if it were deserted. Leaves fell off. Dry.

The closer I got to the village, the stronger my imagination of a poor village. What I had in mind: villagers suffering from prolonged diseases; malnourished skinny children; people with lumps all over the body.

It was an imagination on the horror of the Minamata disease (mercury intoxication). Photos on victims of the Minamata disease, published in the media, make anyone who sees them shudder. So tragic.

Having such an imagination is understandable because since July 20, 2004, Buyat Pante village, located in the Ratatotok Kecamatan of South Minahasa Regency of North Sulawesi, has attracted the public attention worldwide.

The controversy started after dr. Jane Pangemanan and four Buyat Pante villagers reported PT Newmont Minahasa Raya to the police. This gold mining company was accused of polluting Buyat Bay, resulting in the ensuing death. In brief, NGO activists accused that NMR's tailings (arsenic and methylmercury) caused Minamata diseases in Minahasa. Wow!

Several Buyat Pante villagers then flew to Jakarta. They met reporters and were on TV. Some of them were treated in a number of hospitals. The peak moment was when baby Andini died.

Jane later on February 14, 2005 in a press conference withdrew her police complaint. She said there was no strong evidence to support her accusations.

The Kijang car we drove then stopped in front of a house. When the house's door was opened, my expectation to see sick people disappeared all of a sudden. Surprisingly, what I witnessed was some little kids aged between 4 and 6 years old with happy faces. When we tried to take the opportunity to take their pictures, they voluntarily and happily showed off.

"No sick people here," said a mother passing while holding her child. "Having a headache and a cough is normal during the dry season," said the mother.

I then remembered the result of a study conducted by Prof. dr. Winsy F. Th Waraow of the Department of Dermatology of the Faculty of Medicine of University of Sam Ratulangi, Manado. Winsy researched on the health of the villagers living on the nearby coastal area. The conclusion: no villager suffers from a symptom of being intoxicated by arsenic.

Winsy's research was supported by the study conducted by Prof. Haryoto Kusnopranto M.D., Dr. PH of the Center of Public Health and Environmental Health, University of Indonesia. Dr. Keith Bentley of the Center for Environmental Health, Australia was also in line with the two professors above.

I then moved and passed along tens of houses built near the beach. I found no sick people. I watched a beautiful wooden house with a parabola. The parabola sat on the left side of a house of Hendrik Ponto. A lot of cables from other houses get connected to it.

"Thanks to the parabola, since last year we have been able to watch TV," said Robert Sasuwahe, chief of the Buyat Pante. "Life has been better since there was a parabola," he said.