

## Return Our Family

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Minahasa – Enjoying the waves of Buyat Bay and soft breeze, in a terrace of a modest house a 58-year man looks engrossed in fixing his net. His facial expression clearly tells us that he has lived a hard life. The man's name is Robert Sasuwahe.

Robert is the chief of Buyat Pante village, Ratatotok of South Minahasa. The father of nine children is a fisherman who makes a living at Buyat Bay.

He looked sad when questioned about villagers who chose to leave Buyat Pante village, following alleged pollution of Buyat Bay by tailings disposed of by PT Newmont Minahasa Raya. "Our family has been made separated," said Robert.

He looked far to the sea. "Don't separate us from our family," he begged. Begging? Don't know to whom?

Robert said that originally Buyat Pante village was inhabited by 43 heads of family (309) persons. Since issues on the alleged pollution came to surface, the number of Buyat Pante people has increased to 68 heads of family. "People are not afraid of pollution. They have come here because a lot of people give donations," said Robert.

The regional administration of South Minahasa provided assistance in the form of 20 motor boats (ketinting), a sum of Rp. 350,000 / head of family and 50 tons of rice. For a period of 3 to 4 months they had been prohibited from fishing. "The people claiming from NGOs have prohibited us from using the ketinting," said Robert. "Perhaps, to make us stay poor," he added.

Robert used to be a field coordinator for demonstration actions to the office of the North Sulawesi governor in Manado. The demonstration was staged to have PTNMR accused of polluting and damaging Buyat Bay brought to court. Robert finally came to realize that the villagers of Buyat Pante had been divided. His income from fishing drastically decreased. "My children and wife are now back to Bitung," he said.

Robert does not believe that there is pollution. He believed that pollution issues have only caused poverty. Nobody wants to buy our fish. "We will die of hunger, instead of pollution," said Robert.

The division among Buyat Pante villagers has become wider. Robert is no longer willing to serve as a field coordinator. When the regional administration planned to evacuate the villagers with assistance from NGOs, Robert was one of the people who disagreed with the plan. "We almost killed one another here. In fact, 50% of the villagers here are my own family," said Robert.

However, tens of heads of family in June 2005 finally decided to move to Dominango of Bolaang Mongondow regency, 100 km away from Buyat pante village. "I got hit by my own relative when I tried to prevent them from moving out," said Robert. "Most of the villagers who relocated are still my family members," said Robert.

Now, one year after they relocated, Robert and the villagers (23 heads of family) who decided to stay at Buyat Pante have lived a normal life. Every morning just before Subuh (morning prayer time in Islam) he heads out to the sea. At 08.00 he has put his boat ashore and then sells the fish. Everyday he earns Rp. 100.000.

Nevertheless, there is something that has worried him. "Get our relatives back," he requested.