

tong tana

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Keeping a promise

Health care centre opened for the Penan in Sarawak's rain forest

Heartfelt applause resounded in the jungle clearing as headman Kelesau Naan and the Swiss doctor Roger Bühler joined in cutting the ribbon. With this symbolic gesture, the mini clinic supported by the Bruno Manser Fonds and located in Long Kerong in the Malaysian state of Sarawak was opened on November 3rd. More than 100 Penan from sixteen partly very distant communities came to take part in the ceremony.

Already at the end of the 90's, Bruno Manser had promised the Penan that a health care facility would be built for them in the rain forest. Although things took a different turn after the Swiss rain forest activist disappeared in May 2000, the project was finally realised thanks to the very generous support from the joint heirs of Barbara and Peter Nathan-Neher from Zurich.

Headman Kelesau Naan was very pleased: "The government refuses to provide the Penan with an adequate health care service because we are against deforestation. The mini clinic is visible proof that, even after the disappearance of Bruno, many people are still supporting our efforts for the rain forest."



More than 100 Penan participate in the opening ceremony for the mini clinic in Long Kerong built with BMF support.

A wilderness doctor in the rain forest

Dr. Roger Bühler is 37, he grew up in the eastern part of Switzerland and lives in the mountains of the Valais. He is particularly fond of nature, sports and travel. After spending several years as an assistant doctor for surgery and rheumatology, and as the representative for a general practitioner, he took advantage of an opportunity to more closely combine his profession with his own personal passions. He taught wilderness medicine for mountain climbers and others seeking adventure. At the beginning of 2006, he heard that the Bruno Manser Fonds was looking for a doctor who could build up the medical facility in Long Kerog in an honorary capacity. After three months of specialised training at the Swiss



Tropical Institute in Basel, Roger Bühler went to Sarawak at the beginning of July 2006.

Village Health Workers from Long Kerong

By the time Bühler arrived in Long Kerong, the clinic's buildings and a guesthouse were finished, constructed by Penan from seven villages with wood from the communities' forests. There was electricity from a solar collector that had been installed by a volunteer from the Bruno Manser Fonds. Refrigeration for medicine was functioning, but there was neither a water supply nor furnishings.

At a meeting of the project committee, the Penan elected Sarina Laeng and Stephen Belok to assume local responsibility for the project. In the following weeks, they were trained by Roger Bühler as "Village Health Workers". In addition to a basic knowledge of the human organism, the course of study included the symptoms and treatment for numerous illnesses as well as nutrition and the care of newborns. Shortly before the clinic was opened, Sarina Laeng and Stephen Belok passed the oral examination given by Roger Bühler. They are now able to assist medical specialists and to treat simpler cases independently if a doctor is not available at the moment. In the meantime, the health care centre has been appropriately furnished and equipped. And there is now running water!

Frequent complaints about back pains and indigestion

The clinic started providing services in the middle of July, and since then has been frequently used by the Penan from Long Kerong and the surroundings. Roger Bühler wanted to know about the

general health situation in the village. He questioned 64 of the villagers and found out that two-thirds of them were suffering from back pain. It was the result of hard physical work in the rice fields and in the rain forest. Two-thirds also complained about indigestion and stomach ache. More than half said they had been vaccinated against tuberculosis, polio, tetanus and measles. But only three knew that the tetanus vaccination had to be renewed every ten years. As almost no Penan has healthy teeth, there is a substantial need in the area of dentistry. The main causes are insufficient nutrition and the lack of dental hygiene. Fortunately, the use of addictive substances has been minimal. Only four of the villagers who were questioned smoke or consume alcohol.

Starting point for medical care in other areas

The Penan in many other communities have medical problems similar to those in Long Kerong, and is the reason for Roger Bühler not limiting himself to consultations in that village alone. He has travelled to ten other villages and treated more than 700 patients. In the future, the two village health workers will also travel to neighbouring villages at regular intervals. Many Penan live too far away to be able to reach the health care facility. The fields of hygiene, nutrition, vaccinations and dental care must be given special consideration if the Penan's general level of health is to be continuously improved. Roger Bühler estimates the costs in this respect at about 70'000 francs annually.

In addition to its function as a basis station, the mini clinic will also play an important role in terms of traditional medicine. The Penan showed Roger Bühler about 35 plants that can be used against coughing, high blood pressure, malaria and other illnesses. The doctor realised that, although the effectiveness of these plants is well known, they are no longer used by many of the Penan. There is the additional problem that certain plants have almost been eradicated by the logging in the rain forest. Long Kerong will thus become a centre of traditional knowledge for developing the healing powers of the rain forest plants.

A day to rejoice

Each headman brought a different medicinal plant from his village to the opening of the mini clinic. They were ceremoniously planted in a garden in back of the clinic. Afterwards, the Penan were invited to inspect the new health care centre from the inside. The guests, some of whom had been underway for several days, inquisitively viewed the two examination rooms, the stocks of medicine and the waiting room. As some of the visitors wanted to use the opportunity to discuss their medical problems with the doctor, extraordinary consultations began immediately thereafter. The programme of festivities continued at the same time, with fresh venison and rice being served in a decorated place under a coverage of cooling leaves from the rain forest. Afterwards, when the headmen had had enough to eat and were in good spirits, they spent the afternoon sharing news and in discussions with one another. Towards evening, all came together again for another good meal, the exchanging of gifts, gossip, laughter and dancing until late in the night. For a few hours, the daily threats to the rain forest had been forgotten.



Working quietly and with routine, Dr. Roger Bühler removes the lipoma from the neck of Jessica Maha.

Minor surgery, far-reaching effect

Jessica Maha (39) walked for two days from Ba Pengaran to Long Kerong. It was not only because of the ceremony celebrating the opening of the mini clinic that she undertook the long trek through the rain forest. She wanted to have a lipoma removed from her neck. This benign tumour of fatty tissue cells appeared six years ago and was becoming increasingly painful when she used her shoulder straps to carry heavy loads. Until now she had not been able to afford a visit to a city hospital. After the festive group had viewed the new mini clinic and it was a bit quieter in the buildings, Jessica Maha had the appointment she had yearned for. She lay down on the operating table in the examination room.

Local anaesthesia, cut, sew – Dr. Bühler worked quietly and with routine. Within half an hour the lipoma had been removed. “Now I can really enjoy the opening ceremony”, Jessica Maha said. Two days later, before starting for home, she visited the mini clinic again. The stitches still had to be removed.

Person with medical training being sought

As part of our health care project in Sarawak / Malaysia, we are looking for a person with medical training (human medicine or dentistry, possibly nursing / physiotherapy) for voluntary service of 4–6 weeks. For further information, contact Dr. med. Roger Buehler (tel. 078 843 77 29), e-mail roger@survivalschool.ch, or the office of the Bruno Manser Fonds in Basel.

Medicinal plants from the rain forest in a garden next to the mini clinic will preserve the medical knowledge of the Penan.



News in brief

Success for the Penan campaign

Jewson Ltd., the British wholesaler dealing in construction materials, will soon no longer be buying and selling timber from Sarawak.

This good news has just been received from friends in Britain. The reasons for withdrawal, according to Jewson, are due to the letter of protest published in the "Times" and the fact that the blockade in the primeval forest (see below) is preventing Samling, Jewson's supplier in Malaysia, from providing certified timber. With this withdrawal on the part of Jewson, the campaign of the Penan and the Bruno Manser Fonds has achieved an important success. Jewson was the first foreign firm to acquire timber from Sarawak that had been certified with the controversial MTCC label.

Penan blockade still intact despite harassment

Tong Tana has already reported on it: For more than two years, the Penan from Long Benali have been blocking the construction of a logging road in one of Borneo's last primeval forests. One of the representatives of Sarawak's government now devised a perfidious plan. After allies of the loggers had cleared the blockade on 2 November 2006, he invited all of the Penan in the region to be registered in two distant villages. At the same time, Samling positioned its bulldozers close to what had been a blockade. The Penan, however, decided that they would remain where they were and re-build the roadblock. "The police used this trick in 1991 to break up one of our largest blockades", a Penan spokesman explained to Tong Tana. "We're not going to get caught in that trap a second time."

"Bruno Manser – Laki Penan" film to be premiered in March 2007

What did Bruno Manser experience as he roamed through Borneo's rain forest and met the Penan for the first time in 1984? What was it like for the Penan when a European suddenly appeared and wanted to share their way of life? In his documentary film "Bruno Manser – Laki Penan", the Swiss producer Christoph Kuehn reveals how an environmental activist evolved from the person in search of paradise. Bruno Manser's many-faceted

personality appears in evocative visual and audio documents that were recorded in the jungles of Sarawak and in Switzerland. The film has been submitted to the 2007 Berlinale and will be shown in Swiss cinemas at the beginning of March.

Council of States wants mandatory declaration for wood

In the autumn session of Parliament, the Swiss Council of States approved a motion requiring that the species and origin of wood products be declared, and charged the Federal Council with elaborating the necessary draft for a bill. The 20:18 decision in the upper house was extremely close and taken against the will of the Federal Council, or executive. By approving the motion, the upper house took up a long-standing request of environmental organisations. The Bruno Manser Fonds had asked for this mandatory declaration for timber products already in 1994 but did not succeed in pushing it through the Swiss parliament.

Switzerland's accession to the International Tropical Timber Agreement, 2006

The Federal Council has decided to sign the International Tropical Timber Agreement of 2006. The agreement forms the basis for Switzerland's continued collaboration in the International Tropical Timber Organisation. In a joint response, formulated together with the Society for Threatened Peoples (GfbV), the Bruno Manser Fonds has criticised the fact that the ITTO is still far away from the attainment of its goal of developing and managing sustainable tropical forests. However, if Switzerland were to distance itself from this agreement, it would be a wrong political signal. Accession must still be approved by Parliament.



Bruno Manser Fonds with a new website.

The new website of the Bruno Manser Fonds went online at the beginning of December. Visit us at www.bmf.ch – we're looking forward to your echo.

Impressum

Tong Tana means "in the forest" in the language of the indigenous Penan living in the rainforest of Sarawak (Malaysia)

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