Letter from Medan

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A failing economy takes its toll in fear and anger, says JOHN McCARTHY

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After landing in Medan, North Sumatra, it took no time at all to realise that things had gone seriously amiss.

On the way to my research site, near Gunung Leuser National Park, the tire on the minibus I was travelling on burst and the car jackknifed all over the road. We had just come down a steep mountain, so I was extremely relieved that the tire burst on a flat piece of road.

As the price of tires has more than doubled, buses are running on bald tires over rugged terrain. 'We can't afford new tires', the conductor of the minibus exclaimed. 'How can average people like us to survive'. His voice was almost breaking with frustration mixed with anger. 'And I heard on the news they want to put up the price of petrol next month - we'll be finished when this happens'. (Reducing subsidies on fuel and food is among the required IMF reforms).

The newspapers said that thirty percent of public transport vehicles are now off the road because their owners can't afford the spare parts to keep them running.

Planting

I arrived in the village a day after Hari Raya, the feast marking the end of the fasting month. A year previously, I'd met lots of people by a simple act - sitting in a coffee shop on the main street. But now the festive mood had quickly dissipated. All able bodied men had taken to the hills. With the economic crash, there was no time to sip coffee in the local warung. It was planting time.

Rolim, a craftsman with a large furniture shop in the main street, had abandoned his furniture shop to plant cash crops in an empty plot of land behind his house. The reason was simple: with the prices of foodstuffs rocketing, no-one could afford his furniture. The economy was forcing everyone in the village to become a peasant. As official salaries were no longer sufficient to buy food stuffs, even public servants were out opening plots to grow cash crops.

On a local mini bus one day, a man held up a bag of cooking oil - 'Rp 1500 a litre', he said. 'You used to be able to go to the market with Rp 10,000 and buy everything you need. Now that only buys some oil and rice and maybe one or two other things'. A few days later cooking oil threatened to disappear completely from the local market. Within a week it was selling for Rp 4500 a litre.

I too began to wonder. Some people had no land, or no capital to buy seedlings. Other families had no able bodied men to open plots of land. Would people end up starving?

Angry

I'd spend nights listening to reports of food rioting on short wave. In remote places, the abstractions of white collared economists wearing pointy ties made no sense. People were angry and wanted to take things in their own hands. But who to blame? And from whom could they demand justice? In warungs each day people apportioned blame. Some said it was Chinese food hoarders, others the Americans.

But I had personal concerns: What would happen when the rioting reached here? Would I be able to leave? Would the buses continue to run?

Eventually, despite assurances from my friends and even the village head that I was safe here, I decided to leave. Clearly I faced no immediate danger, but only one issue was critical here: how would they feed their families - today, next week, in one month? If I would stay, how could I help? Anyway, I felt uncomfortable with the role of a researcher in these conditions. When people were struggling so hard, how could I interview them about wildlife and forest use?

Back in Medan, I rang a friend, an Australian woman. She told me this story. 'Yesterday my pembantu (home help) came to the house and asked me if I wanted a baby. I said "What do you mean". "Well", said the woman, "one of my friends in the kampung can't afford powdered milk for her baby anymore. And so she is trying to find someone who can afford to keep it"'.

Later, a taxi driver asked me if I was a reporter. 'No, why?', I replied. 'Because if you stay a few more weeks it will be very interesting', he said. 'You will see something big. It will be like a war'. 'But what I don't understand is who is the enemy', I asked. 'The enemy will be the rich, the corrupters, those who have got rich unfairly, the Chinese, and Christians. They will burn lots of churches. It is going to be very bad...'.

27 February 1998. Days of rioting broke out all over North Sumatra in early May.

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