

Death of a hunter

What really happened to Kelesau Naan, tribal elder and forest campaigner?



A small tribe in Borneo is fighting to save their ancestral forests. **PAUL MALONE** spent six weeks travelling through the Sarawak region trying to find answers to the death of Kelesau Naan who fought against logging companies for 30 years. In this two-part series, continued in tomorrow's *Sunday Canberra Times*, he examines the conflicting accounts surrounding the elder's death and whether there is any hope of saving what remains of some of the most pristine forests in the world and a unique way of life for the Penan people.

For 30 years the Borneo nomads, the Penan, have battled to save the jungles they have roamed since time immemorial from the loggers. But their cause may have suffered a fatal blow. The foremost leader in their fight, Kelesau Naan, the headman of the tiny village of Long Kerong, is dead, his skeleton found in the jungle in December last year, two months after he disappeared in what some see as suspicious circumstances.

Kelesau was not the first opponent of logging to go missing. Swiss environmentalist Bruno Manser, who lived with the Penan for several years and helped publicise their cause, disappeared without trace in Sarawak in May 2000. Manser, a drop-out medical student and artist, has become a near-legendary figure, twice escaping from police, once by jumping off an embankment into the Magoh River to evade a police ambush. It is generally believed that he died.

Kelesau Naan had been a thorn in the side of the loggers for many years. The lead signatory in the 1998 Malaysian High Court Penan land claim, the quietly spoken man in his 70s, commanded great respect from the community. On October 23 last year, after working with his wife, Uding Lidem, at their small rice paddy cut in the forest near the Segita River, two hours walk from his village, Kelesau said he was going out to check his traps. He suggested she pack their gunny bag and they and their sick son, who had a fever, would return to their village in the evening. He never returned.

Uding assumed that he had got caught up with something but became worried in the evening.

By morning Kelesau had still not returned but she felt she could not leave as she needed to look after her son. The following morning she knew she had to go. Soon after setting off she met Parry Dok, a Penan man from Long Kerong, who was out hunting. Parry raced back to Long Kerong to report the missing man and a widespread search involving villagers from across the region began.

Initially they searched the mountain areas where they thought Kelesau would have set his traps. They used dogs and extended the search to every possible track and trail. Finding no trace, Kelesau's son, Nick Kelesau said they became certain he had not lost his way or been killed by animals. They were convinced he had been killed and his body hidden.

There could be no better people to search for someone in the jungle than the Penan. One anthropologist, who spent two years with them, found they were much more successful hunters than their neighbours, who often asked them to lead expeditions. In hunting with dogs the Penan were twice as productive as the Kenyah in taking prey and in another technique the Penan averaged 15.9 kills per person while the Kenyah only got 2.8 kills each.

Two months after his disappearance Kelesau's skeleton was found. Some clothing and a woven bag provided the first hint – then the bones and his skull.

A forearm was broken. It could have been an accident, but on January 2, 2008, the *Malaysiakini* internet publication reported that the villagers suspected foul play.

Some thought the bone was cut with a sharp object. Others wondered how they could have missed the body when it was at a spot frequently passed by Penan in their travels between villages. How could they not have smelt it?

Nick Kelesau said it was murder and speculated that his father had

been killed and thrown into the river, with something heavy placed on top of the body so that it wouldn't float.

These statements stung the logging company, Samling, just listed on the Hong Kong stock exchange and trying to build its reputation as a respectable international operation.

One man was particularly annoyed, according to a Penan, Lim Hon Guan, who lives in the coastal city of Miri where Samling is based.

Hon said a Chinese trader Kho Thien Seng (commonly known as Sio) from the village of Long Akah, was very angry about the *Malaysiakini* report.

"This statement is bullshit," Sio told him. "Why did Nick do this to Samling?"

Hon cannot remember the exact date, but he says in a car in Miri in front of the post office at about 4pm Sio produced two letters and asked him to sign them. Sio told him the first was an acknowledgment of receipt of 500 ringgits (about \$A160) he gave Hon as a Christmas present from Samling. The second he was told was a thank-you to Samling.

Hon did not read the letters. Perhaps because he is the most accessible Penan, Hon is often asked to act as go-between with Penan villagers and he agreed to fly to the Mulu National Park with Sio to see Nick, who worked there as a security guard. There Sio produced two letters and asked Nick to sign them.

Failing in his mission Sio returned to Miri and the next day approached Hon and produced a letter with Hon's signature on it as a witness to a statement by Nick that he did not suspect any foul play in the death of his father.

He said it was only then he realised that his second signature was on a letter as a "witness" to Nick's "statement". Sio asked Hon to also sign for Nick's signature. Hon refused.

Later, Hon said that in his presence, and at Sio's instigation, a Malay man, Sidi, tried to trace Nick's signature on to the letter. Hon was then asked to say that Nick had signed the letter. He said he responded that he would not. "I'm a Christian and I tell the truth."

But he refused point-blank to sign the other – a brief, typed statement saying he did not suspect foul play in the death of his father.

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Nick said Sio told him, "I have read the news in the internet, you cannot make those allegations like those NGOs. What you have done by helping to publish those news in the internet, you are allowing yourself to be made use of by them for their own gains. They care only of their own interests."

So then asked how much the people had spent in trying to locate his father's remains and in funeral expenses and offered to pay.

"How many bags of cement?" Sio said. "I will arrange everything tomorrow. If I ask from Samling, they will pay for all the expenses."

"You help to sign this letter. It is nothing. I will pay you 20,000 ringgits. Just help me to sign it, I give you 25,000 ringgits. Tomorrow I go to Samling to take the money, and I will bank the money straight into your account. I will ask Lim Khua Kuan [Hon] to bank in the money into your account."

Although 25,000 ringgits (equivalent to about \$8000 now) is a huge amount of money for Penan people who have low cash income, Nick still refused to sign.

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Both Nick and Hon have made statements to the police.

The investigating inspector, Chen, told me by phone on June 5 that he could not say when he would report on the police investigation outcome.

Sio, who has been described by some as a "friendly" man and "a good operator", has not responded to messages left for him and repeated attempts to speak to him by phone.

Samling's initial response to questions was that Sio was not, and never had been an "employee" of Samling.

The company said he was not contracted or asked to act on its behalf. He was a Penan-speaking trader who bought gaharu, a valuable incense wood, from the Penan.

But there was no question in the minds of those in the Penan communities, who have been dealing with Sio in recent times, that he was acting as a Samling agent.

During the period when Kelesau Naan was missing, Sio, accompanied by a Samling employee, Martin Hamilton, visited the Penan kampongs of Long Benalih, Long Sait and Long Kerong, seeking the communities' agreement to lift the Long Benalih blockade and enable the Samling road to go through to Long Lellang.

They made two visits, flying in by helicopter on November 19 and November 21. In exchange for agreement to the logging road, a number of community projects were planned, to be financed by Samling.

Pressed on the question of Samling's relationship with Sio, the company's chief operating officer, James Ho, said Samling wanted to resolve the stalemate with the Penan. Sio had been trading with the Penan for years and Samling believed he was well liked by them so when he offered to help us we agreed to it. Our action was sincere and nothing sinister as believed by others, Ho said.

At that time I knew nothing of the forged letter.

What I had picked up was that Nick Kelesau had apparently made conflicting statements – one saying he suspected his father had been murdered and another saying that he did not suspect foul play.

But Hon said he attended a meeting with Sio and a senior Samling officer introduced as, Yong, as well as James Ho, and Martin Hamilton. He said they talked in room at Samling's office in Miri. "Did you see Nick sign this one?" they asked. "I did see Nick sign the appreciation letter, yes, but the other one, I don't know [about]," he said.

Hon's English is not perfect but over three interviews his story was consistent and supported the statements by Nick Kelesau that Nick never signed any letter saying that he did not suspect foul play in the death of his father.

It is not uncommon for people confronted with a tragic death to lash out, and lay blame. Most organisations confronted with such an allegation in an emotionally charged atmosphere, let it pass.

But Samling was clearly hurt by the statements claiming murder, particularly those from Nick.

I visited the Samling office and spoke with James Ho about the allegations.

"Tell Nick to tell the truth," Ho told me at the end of my meeting.

A tall thin man who could be a chief executive in any major company in the world, Ho had just given a strong presentation on the operations of his company, the thrust of which was that Samling would operate within the laws of the land and do what it was authorised to do – log the forests and run plantations.

This meeting was before I set off to investigate Kelesau's death and hear the Penan's side of the logging story. At that time I knew nothing of the forged letter.

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river." The broken forearm led to all sorts of speculation. There were suggestions that it had been cut by a sharp object – perhaps a parang which every forest native carries in his or her travels.

But the first man to begin the search, Parry Dok, said he thought the bone had been broken by being struck by a blunt object like a stick.

"How could you tell if he'd been struck by a stick, or fallen against something and broken his arm?" I asked. He did not have an answer.

The autopsy, conducted for the police, concludes that the cause of death cannot be established. Kelesau was an old man. He had gone into the jungle alone to hunt. Weather conditions were bad. The probability of an accident, would have to be strong. But in the highly charged atmosphere of the battle over the forests, it is understandable that local people believe he was murdered.

Heading up the police investigation is the relatively junior 27-year-old Inspector Sumarno Lamundi. Because of the concerns raised by the community, police exhumed the skeleton but gained little useful information. Police have few clues to work with and police spokesman Deputy Superintendent Jonathan Jalim said the claims of foul play were all hearsay.

In recent times there have been clashes between the Penan and others and Kelesau Naan played a leading role in trying to defuse tensions.

For example, in mid-June a party of Penan from the village of Long Sait ran into a group of Samling workers conducting survey work in land the Penan claim.

According to a Penan report on the incident they told the group, led by a Kenyah man, Dungau Lenjau, to leave. "We did not hurt or beat anybody," the Penan said. They did admit to taking some grocery items.

The Kenyah people, angry over the incident, challenged the Penan to a fight.

The headmen of Long Sait, Bilong Oyau and Kelesau Naan wrote to the manager of the Samling camp, seeking to prevent any further incidents "which will aggravate the feeling of unhappiness for the company, the Kenyah and the Penan people".

But, according to the Penan, a meeting called to resolve the situation ended in chaos.

The Penan have a long-standing reputation as peaceful people. While the Iban were notorious as head-hunters and other tribal groups fought wars with each other, the Penan avoided conflict, roaming the remote reaches of the jungle in small groups.

A Lundayeh man, Jay Langub, who speaks Penan and worked with them as a government officer for 30 years, said the Penan were peaceful, but argumentative. "I don't think I ever won an argument with them."

In all his time with them he never saw a Penan man hit another Penan man.

Others confirm the Penan are shy and peaceful. If attacked, they retaliate. One belief is that they can walk silently in the forest with their blowpipes and kill unseen. They are reputed to have the most deadly blowpipe dart poisons and some are able to load their pipes with three darts and rapid fire them, a feat no other people have mastered.

Whether Kelesau Naan was murdered, or it was an accidental death, the Penan have lost one of their greatest warriors in the battle to save their forests.

■ **Battle for the Forests:** Paul Malone's two-part series continues in tomorrow's *Sunday Canberra Times*.

