

# From Farmlands to the Frontline: Fragments on Fire

## THE FEARSOME FURNACE

Sadikin was two hours into his first day of work when the call came. His supervisor barked the order. He and some colleagues hopped on to the back of the pickup. “We need people,” said the boss, repeatedly. “Let’s get moving.”

Sadikin felt the heat long before he saw the flame. The smoke—stinging, suffocating smoke—was so thick it smothered everyone. As he came closer, robin pump and coiled hose in tow, the blaze revealed itself with a roar that rose above blackened palm fronds. To draw breath was to lacerate the airway. The mask he was wearing did little to assuage the coughing.

“I was terrified,” Sadikin recalls the moment, sitting on his family’s boat on the Pawan River. “I feared for my life, for the forest, for the neighbouring plots ... the soil was peat. It could just burn and burn.”

Among the first reinforcements to arrive, Sadikin’s team left the site in late afternoon, having laboured for six hours straight. The fire refused to let up. When the team returned to the site the next day, eyes bloodshot, throat parched, Sadikin’s heart was crushed. The fire had laid waste to all it touched. Even then, it wasn’t done. The men kept at it, beating, hauling, dousing.

“

I was terrified,” Sadikin recalls the moment, sitting on his family’s boat on the Pawan River. “I feared for my life, for the forest, for the neighbouring plots ... the soil was peat. It could just burn and burn.



The 2024 firestorm at Ulak Medang, an inland village straddled by two tributaries of the Pawan, took more than fifty people—villagers, farmers, and firefighters—nearly three days to quench. Every crop the community had planted turned to cinder, hectares upon hectares of devastation.

For Sadikin, the fire became a rite of passage, an initiation no manual could prepare him for. “Hours of training pale in comparison when you’re there, right in the furnace,” he says. A native son of Ketapang, now one of Bumitama’s fire patrol supervisors, Sadikin has since learnt to confront fires with a cooler head and subdue them effectively. Regardless, the lesson from that first day stays with him: a single wildfire is already one too many.



## FURY AND REMEDY

When a streak of fires engulfed Sungai Kelik village in 2022, what Febry Apani felt was not fear. “I was furious,” he says. “The fire caught us unprepared. It leapt from plot to plot, till it reached my own.” Under-equipped, having only buckets and water from the ditches, he and his father joined the others to fight the flame and save what they could.

For two days, they persisted, oblivious to the protestations of their bodies. “We were too indignant to be exhausted,” Febry reminisces. “My family lost one hectare to that fire. Some 150 oil palm saplings were on it—all gone, of course.”

The 2022 fire was one among many that had haunted Sungai Kelik over the years. In its aftermath, Bumitama approached the villagers with a proposal to form a KTPA (Kelompok Tani Peduli Api—Community-led Fire-aware Farmers’ Group), to ward off future disasters. The KTPA would operate from within and be run by members of the community. With regular training and equipment assistances from Bumitama and IDH, KTPAs would stand as the first line in spotting risks of potential fires, and the second line, after Bumitama’s own firefighting units, in taming them.

Today, Febry is one of four active members of Sungai Kelik KTPA. Membership rotates among villagers every year. “We conduct patrols in the dry season, and focus on raising farmers’ awareness during the rainy months,” explains Febry. “Even with limited tools, we have seen much improvement here. Farmers now think twice before resorting to fire for land clearing. And if they decide to do so, they will request Bumitama to escort the process.”

“

With regular training and equipment assistances from Bumitama and IDH, KTPAs would stand as the first line in spotting risks of potential fires, and the second line, after Bumitama’s own firefighting units, in taming them.



## FINDINGS ON THE GROUND

Since KTPAs' establishment across fire-prone villages in 2022, Bumitama has slashed the incidence of fires by 70%: from 108 per year during 2015–2021 to just 30 per year for 2022–2024. In West Kalimantan alone, the number of hotspots was reduced from 115 per year over the period of 2020–2021 to 27 per year in 2022–2023, with the running of the KTPAs.

All these show how crucial KTPAs are in Bumitama's efforts to safeguard forests and landscapes surrounding its concessions. Ketapang's vast forest cover makes the need for fire mitigation especially acute, according to Sacha Amaruzaman, Senior Program Manager at IDH. Together, IDH and Bumitama have been incentivising villages to support KTPAs, recognising that their vigilance is what stands between containment and conflagration.

While Bumitama has invested substantially in fire prevention, a host of forces run against it: tradition, cost, convenience, errant winds of the dry season, even government-sanctioned burning (albeit with strict conditions). Selfless people like Sadikin and Febry knowingly place their lives on the line as they face the flame head on. They are not alone; others in their villages have wrestled with the hazards of wildfire year after year.

In Ketapang, as elsewhere, fire is a paradox. For the Dayaks and other indigenous peoples practicing swidden agriculture, it is a primeval tool of renewal, with slash-and-burn techniques handed down for centuries. Furthermore, for the Dayaks, fire is sacred, featured in rituals spanning from birth to death.

It is important to not fall into reductive narratives. Environmental policy researcher Rijal Ramdani evaluated data from 2019–2024 and found that fires in Ketapang did not originate from the orders of palm oil companies, but from 'enclaves'. These are plots located inside concessions but cultivated by villagers for generations. His forthcoming study shows that all 43 hotspots from that period were inside such enclaves. Out of 20 burned sites he examined, 16 were converted not to subsistence crops but to oil palm, planted by smallholders rather than corporations.



“

Since KTPAs' establishment across fire-prone villages in 2022, Bumitama has slashed the incidence of fires by 70%: from 108 per year during 2015–2021 to just 30 per year for 2022–2024. In West Kalimantan alone, the number of hotspots was reduced from 115 per year over the period of 2020–2021 to 27 per year in 2022–2023, with the running of the KTPAs.



Much of the damage, then, had been avoidable, ignited by villagers themselves. And they do so at grave cost—far beyond charred fields. Recent research shows that forest fires produce smoke with high concentrations of lung-scarring PM2.5 particles, up to ten times more toxic than other forms of air pollution. Were that truth more widely understood, would the practice change?



“

**Environmental policy researcher Rijal Ramdani evaluated data from 2019–2024 and found that fires in Ketapang did not originate from the orders of palm oil companies, but from ‘enclaves’. These are plots located inside concessions but cultivated by villagers for generations.**



“

**Out of 20 burned sites he examined, 16 were converted not to subsistence crops but to oil palm, planted by smallholders rather than corporations.**

#### **FANNING A DIFFERENT KIND OF FLAME**

When it comes to wildfires, Ketapang offers a nuanced microcosm where there are no definite villains and victims. In their stead, rituals and customs jostle with necessity and economic motives. For fire governance to be successful, Ramdani believes, it must be orchestrated in collaboration. Companies, village offices, KTPAs, and other stakeholders must share expertise, tools, and legitimacy. Not to drive fire out of the picture, but to contain it in its place.

From Ketapang’s hinterland to its frontiers, the perspective on fire mitigation oscillates between fire-as-threat and fire-as-heritage. With KTPAs as sentinels, palm oil companies and farming communities in Ketapang can put out the fires that destroy, and enkindle another—an invisible flame that sustains resilience through responsibility.