

Emmanuela Dewi Shinta

By Mark Chaves

RIISING ABOVE THE FLAMES

Emmanuela Dewi Shinta is the face of a new generation of Indonesia's indigenous people, at the forefront of taking an active and peaceful role in preserving their heritage and environment. The 23-year-old confronted, head-on, what was dubbed the greatest environmental disaster of the 21st century to date – the 2015 forest fires in Kalimantan, Indonesia.

Shinta is a Dayak, an indigenous ethnic tribe that serves as sentinels for the rainforests of Kalimantan. Every year for the past 18 years, these rainforests have been going up in

smoke, mainly due to slash-and-burn techniques employed by companies to clear the land for plantations. Most of the fires are started illegally and during Indonesia's driest months.

The result is massive destruction of the environment including the infamous annual haze that engulfs Kalimantan, Sumatra, Malaysia and Singapore. Extraordinary El Niño conditions coupled with the highly flammable peatlands made 2015's fires an unprecedented event.

Originally from the Barito district of Central Kalimantan, Shinta moved to Palangka Raya, the province's

capital, in 2009 where she completed a degree in English education. Her current focus is to create a media platform for the Dayak voices and to make a positive difference in the midst of unparalleled adversity.

"I hope to be an example for people to see that anyone can make a change. My top priority right now is to enable the Dayak people to be heard," Shinta relates.

"I decided to take an activist role because the real threats were all around me, like land grabbing, illegal fires, toxic haze and environmental destruction. Globalisation continues to



LEFT Shinta helping a child put on a N95 mask. Central Kalimantan's PSI level reached a threatening 3,600 in 2015

BELOW One of Shinta's teammates training the locals on proper respirator mask usage



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happen, yes, but it doesn't have to be a threat to indigenous people like us.”

She continues, “There are some of us now who are not afraid to go beyond traditional boundaries, that is to take a stand to protect what is vital, and not only what is vital to us Dayaks, but for all inhabitants of this planet.”

Last year on 7 September 2015, Central Kalimantan declared a state of emergency with the pollution index soaring up to 3,600 on the Pollutant

Standards Index (PSI) scale. Readings over 300 PSI is considered dangerous, but sustained levels of 2,000 PSI were frequently reported in the area.

Shinta, supported by 150 fellow activists took the pleas of the Dayaks to the governor's office on 22 September to demand action, but their attempts were met with silence.

However, Shinta's call to action did not go entirely unnoticed. Her team drew media attention from neighbouring Malaysia and Singapore, with a documentary film produced by Channel News Asia, called *Get Real: The Heart of the Haze* showing her leading protests in Palangka Raya. Shinta's hopes were slowly becoming realised as her people's voices were beginning to be heard.

New collaborations followed which resulted in more support. Shinta was able to coordinate the distribution of nearly 25,000 N95 respirator masks, delivery of food for the beleaguered firefighters and staffing of medical personnel along with supplies to remote villages.

Shinta imparts, “Every act is meaningful, and I see myself as a small piece of the puzzle. I want to see hundreds and even thousands of people, young and old in Kalimantan, working together towards a common purpose to help and protect each other. The greatest achievement we can have is to rise above being self-centred so that we can create a better world for everyone.” ♦ AG