Orangutans miss jungle homes
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In the past two years, Unyil, 6, has only been able to exercise by swinging from
one rope to another in a square enclosure at the Animal Rescue Center in
Petungsewu, Malang, East Java.

It is uncertain how long the male Kalimantan orangutan ( Pongo pygmaeus ) will
remain in the eight meters square enclosure.

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This is because all of the enclosures in the orangutan reintroduction center in
Nyari Menteng, which is about 30 kilometers away from Palangkaraya, the capital
of Central Kalimantan, are full -- there is no room for any newcomer.

"I heard the center still has about 630 orangutans that have yet to be released
into the wild," Iwan Kurniawan, the coordinator of the Animal Rescue Center
(PPS) in Petungsewu told The Jakarta Post in December.

Unyil is one of four Kalimantan orangutans that are still "in transit" at PPS
Petungsewu. Besides Unyil, there is 4-year-old Jackson, 5-year-old Boni and
13-year-old Noni.

Some of the orangutans were delivered to the rescue center by concerned
citizens, while the rest arrived with Natural Resources Conservation officers
who had confiscated the primates from their unlawful owners.

The orangutans at PPS Petungsewi are not alone in their plight. Those in other
Animal Rescue Centers like PPS Jogjakarta, PPS Cikananga, West Java, and PPS
Tasikoki in Minahasa, North Sulawesi, share the same fate, according to Iwan.

"This is an important area. Rescue centers are temporary transit shelters and we
don't specialize in handling orangutans. Ironically, the Nyaru Menteng center is
overcrowded because there are very few places where we can safely release the
orangutans," Iwan said.

Despite being legally protected in Indonesia, orangutans are often hunted,
killed, orphaned, injured or sold into captivity.

According to 2004 data from the International Workshop on Population Habitat
Viability Analysis (PHVA), the population of orangutans in Kalimantan was
57,797, while Sumatra had an orangutan population of 7,501.

Hundreds of orangutans in Nyaru Menteng have not been released to the wilderness
due to the lack of tropical forest area that is safe, suitable and appropriate
for orangutan habitat, according to Rosek Nursahid, the chairman and founder of
ProFauna International.

The official website of the Nyaru Menteng center says they have not released any
rehabilitated orangutan since 1999. At present, 38 orangutans (including six
child orangutans) are deemed ready for release.

According to Rosek, the problem has much to do with the loss of rainforest in
the country -- the orangutans stronghold -- due to illegal logging, forest fires
and the clearance of forest for housing, farming and plantations.

As of 2000, the natural orangutan habitat in Indonesia had reduced from 340,000
hectares to 165,000 hectares.

"The government must protect the orangutans after they are released. Otherwise
the rehabilitation process is for nothing," Rosek said.

The government, through the Forestry Ministry, says it has worked hard to
develop a national strategy and action plan for orangutans.

Yet, Rosek said the launching of the Conservation Strategy and Action Plan for
Indonesian Orangutans 2007-2017, by President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono in the
United Nation Climate Change Conference in Bali on Dec.10, was unsupported by
real actions or conviction.

"The government's commitment is only lip service. There should be a 25-30 year
moratorium on the conversion and destruction of forests to increase the size of
orangutan habitats and boost their security," Rosek said.

The government should demonstrate its commitment by allocating funds for
orangutan conservation to all animal rescue centers in Indonesia, banning the
transfer of orangutans to safari parks, where they are exploited to entertain
visitors, and fully supporting the moratorium on the conversion and destruction
of Indonesian forests.

"Under the moratorium, we will be able to save both orangutans and the forest
while under the Reducing Emissions from Degradation and Deforestation (REDD)
scheme, it is not clear how the funds will be allocated," he said.

Rosek suggested a scheme that allowed a developed country to donate compensation
funds for orangutans and Indonesian forest conservation by hectares.

"The price of an orangutan in Europe is between US$40,000 and $50,000. The
compensation should be higher than that," he said.

"It is tragic that a globally recognizable species like the orangutan can no
longer survive it in its jungle habitat. The government should be held
responsible," Rosek said.

The President said the orangutan was the icon of the rainforest. Therefore the
rainforest should be saved in order to save orangutans. Orangutans are now
endangered because in the past 35 years, Indonesia has lost about 50,000
orangutans.

"If this condition continues, in 2050 the orangutan will be extinct," he said.

That is why the Indonesian government launched the strategy and action plan for
orangutan conservation, the President said. He also asked the nation to support
environmentalists' efforts to save the orangutans.