

Bill Clinton pays a visit to Hin Look Dio Village

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The following transcript is Somsook's brief account of Bill Clinton's visit to Hin Look Dio Village, a small Moken "sea gypsy" village on the northeastern coast of Phuket Island. Hin Look Dio is now part of the network of 20 poor settlements in Phuket, and is in the process of rebuilding itself, after being partly destroyed by the tsunami and subsequently evicted from the villagers' traditional land. . .



Everything happened in less than 40 minutes : Then he went out, first to watch the local dance performance, and to cut the ribbon on the village's brand new community center (*finished only in the wee hours of the night before!*). Everything happened in less than 40 minutes, from the arrival and greetings, to the looking at the boats, to the mangrove planting, to the press interviews at the planting site, to the exhibition, to the little dance performance by the children, to the opening of the new community center and walking around the community. I tried my best to say a lot of things in this very short time! And I was able to hand him a copy of the posters and the full packet of information on the tsunami

process, Hin Look Dio, and the New Orleans exchange visits (hard copies and on a CD). So he could read it in the car.

The visit focused on the issue of mangrove forest revitalization : Mr. Clinton visited Thailand only very briefly, on his way to Aceh. His main purpose in coming seemed to be to promote the revival of mangrove forests in tsunami areas and elsewhere, with the World Conservation Union's Mangroves for the Future (MFF) Initiative.



The forests that saved people's lives : When Mr. Clinton first arrived, we greeted him (with the Governor of Phuket and the UNDP Resident Representative) and then showed him the little inlet down below, where the villagers moor their boats. Through an interpreter, the village leader told him how all their boats that were tied up here were destroyed when the tsunami came, but that the surrounding mangrove forests absorbed a great deal of the waves' power and saved the lives of the people here. Elsewhere nearby, many people died because there was no natural buffer like these mangroves to slow down the waves or lessen their fury. Mr. Clinton took up this idea right away, and said *you see, this is the forest that saves people's lives, so this is something very important.*



Looking at the poster exhibition : Next we came to the old community center. Here, an exhibition of posters had been set up – posters describing the people-driven tsunami rehabilitation process in Thailand, the role of community networks in supporting the rebuilding of tsunami-hit communities, and some more specific information about the rehabilitation of Hin Look Dio Village itself. We had arranged these posters in a sequence so that first came the posters about the overall tsunami process in the six affected provinces, and in this Phuket province. Then, right in front of where Mr. Clinton stopped were the three new posters about the Hin Look Dio Village, with the New Orleans exchange poster at the end.

About the New Orleans exchange visits to Thailand and Indonesia : When we got to the last poster, I told him about the exchange visits from the New Orleans groups. And he really listened with great interest. He took the time to read the quotations that were highlighted on this poster – laughing at several of the quotes! He said, *"I like this! See what they said?"* I told him that the New Orleans / Gulf Coast groups that have come here have been really happy to see how these poor Thai villagers coming together as a community, and that they were saying that although they were much richer in USA, they don't have this culture of coming together.



Passing on the message from the New Orleans group : Then, I told Mr. Clinton that when our friends in New Orleans heard about this visit, they asked me to pass on a message to you, that it would be really helpful if the US Government would allow them the opportunity and support them to work together as a group, to reconstruct their own houses and communities together as a group, as the people in Thailand and Aceh have done. With a smiling face, he responded with something like, *"That's what they said, is it?"* So could pass on the message from the New Orleans group – and he read it and he liked it.



Hin Look Dio villagers replanting mangroves :

Next, Mr. Clinton was taken over to a muddy shoreline area where the villagers have been planting hundreds of mangrove seedlings, to bring back the deteriorated mangrove forests. The message we were trying to project was that here, the people protect the mangroves, and the mangroves protect the people – it's a symbiotic relationship. Along the way, I explained that here in Phuket, there are 20 communities which have started this campaign of replanting blighted mangrove forests. And they take turns helping to plant in different communities, so 20 groups of villagers come to one place to help plant every

month. He said, *this is really good!* Some sheets of plywood had been laid down so that the entourage could walk out into this mucky area. After Mr. Clinton had planted a mangrove seedling, he spoke to the crowd, saying that, *This is so important, that the people here are protecting this coastal forest which saves lives.*

Mangroves and New Orleans : After a small ceremony in which Mr. Clinton helped plant a mangrove seedling, he mentioned that *if there had been lots of these kinds of mangrove forests around New Orleans, as there used to be, a lot of lives might have been saved, the floods might have been much less, and the damage to the city might have been less than half of what it was.*



Briefing him about the sea gypsy people and their land conflicts : As we went along, we tried to inform him about these being sea gypsy ("Moken") people who were scattered before, and how after the tsunami, the key issue has been to strengthen these communities and link the sea gypsy villages into a network. We tried to emphasize that this *people-strengthening process* is the most important aspect of the tsunami rehabilitation – more important even than the physical aspects of rehabilitation. But that if the work on these *physical* aspects is done in such a way that communities are the key actors, then this work becomes a *community-building* and a *people-building* process.



But the physical aspects of Hin Look Dio's rehabilitation seem to be more-less settled now, after having been delayed a long time, because of the land conflict. We explained to him how only eight months ago, the initial land agreement was settled, in which the community was given permission to rebuild their village on this new piece of public land, under the control of the coastal marine land department. And that's why all the development of houses and infrastructure and

mangrove-planting has started now in earnest.

It might have been a little strange for him to see these very simple bamboo houses that the people have built at Hin Look Dio. In visiting a *tsunami housing rehabilitation project*, he might have been expecting to see some more permanent concrete and brick houses! He seemed a little shocked. I explained to him that this was all very new, and that the community was still in the process of improvement, but that this is more-less the kind of houses which sea gypsy people are happiest to live in and traditionally build for themselves. The idea is that they can improve or upgrade these houses gradually, over time.



But more important than the house structures themselves, is the system by which the people have organized themselves through the housing process: dividing themselves into small sub-groups, and each sub-group organizes construction and accounts committees and then constructs their houses collectively.



Mr. Clinton was then invited to inaugurate the new community center, and to watch a little dance performance by the local children.

What are the tenure terms for the new village at Hin Look Dio? It's still in the negotiation process, and getting the paper with clear permission for the people to use this land. Now the local government is sending the case to get the permission. The land belongs to the Marine and Coastal Land Department, which controls all of Thailand's coastal mangrove forests. The local government then takes the role of asking this central government department for permission for the villager's to use this land, which is

technically "deteriorated" mangrove forest now – it's a different status than a fully OK proper forest, and when it's "deteriorated" it is easier to get permission to use the land.

In this case, they've made the argument that the people are taking an active role in protecting and reviving this coastal mangrove forest, and should therefore be allowed to stay here, where they have always lived – and if they were evicted, who would protect this fragile environment from encroachment and exploitation? That has been the argument, which has been used in several of the tsunami land cases where villagers are trying to rebuild within mangrove land.

Some background on the **Hin Look Dio Village** :

One of the poorest of the sea gypsy communities affected by the tsunami turns an eviction crisis into an opportunity to solve underlying land and housing problems once and for all . . .

Hin Look Dio (which means "one rock" in the Thai) is a very old, very poor Moken ("sea gypsy") fishing community of 54 households (192 people), built among the mangrove forests along the northeastern edge of Phuket island. The people here mostly came from farther up the Andaman coast, in Phangnga Province, but migrated here from farther up the Andaman coast about 100 years ago - first a few families, and then later more joined them. Most of the people living in Hin Look Dio are fishermen, who practice their traditional subsistence fishing as they have always done, from the beautiful wooden "long-tail" boats which they moor in the mangrove backwaters just below the community.



Tsunami damage : The tsunami didn't cause any deaths here, but a lot of the village got flooded and many of the people's very lightly-built bamboo and thatch houses were destroyed. They also lost a lot of their boats, nets and fishing equipment.



Evicted from their traditional land : Before the tsunami, the villagers occupied a small piece of land where they had lived for over 100 years (5-6 generations). But after the tsunami, the community faced a greater crisis when a rich businessman, whom none of the people knew, showed up claiming to be the legal owner of a large portion of their land. 34 of the village's 54 households found themselves being evicted from land they had always considered their own, but had no title deeds for. These 34 families packed up their meager belongings and moved to a strip of low-lying public forest land nearby, classified as "degraded coastal mangrove forests." The remaining 20 families who had no

conflict stayed put. Eventually, with support from the Phuket Community Network and the National Tsunami Land Conflict Committee, the evicted 34 families were able to negotiate with the local sub-district authority to get permission to build temporary houses on this land.



A rare example of Moken life at its most simple and most pure : Palm, who is a young member of CODI's tsunami support staff, describes Hin Look Dio as the most traditional of all the Moken villages hit by the tsunami. Here you won't find much sign of the tourism or commercialization that have transformed other sea gypsy communities along the Andaman coast. In fact you won't find much evidence of the modern world at all: the people still live as simply as the Moken must have lived hundreds of years ago, very close to the rhythms of the sea. The villagers still live in the lightest of bamboo, wood and thatch shelters, which they build themselves on stilts, from materials they gather nearby, and which are empty but for a few cooking utensils and changes of clothing. Most are subsistence fishermen, who sell only the surplus of their catch after feeding their families. But what they lack in material possessions, they make up for in a very long and very rich sea gypsy heritage, with their ballads, their drums, their rituals, their mythology, their gods and their stories. During a recent visit by team of tsunami survivors from Aceh, Yuri, a young architect from Indonesia, whose been working in Aceh since the tsunami asked, "*When will you start building your permanent houses?*" When the people answered, "*These are our permanent houses!*" all Yuri could say was "*Amazing!*"

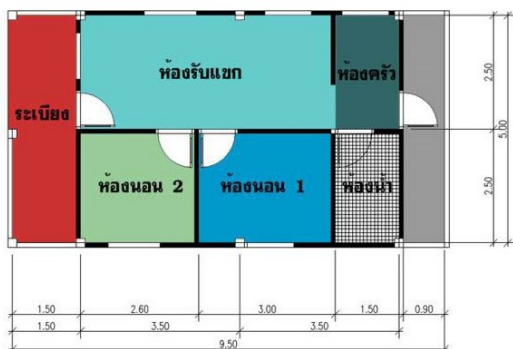


Building a secure, environmentally light-footed new community at Hin Look Dio : These 34 families have now obtained long-term collective land-use rights for this land and are in the process of planning the development of their new community, with support from the Phuket Community Network, the Chumchon Thai Foundation, CODI's Baan Mankong Community Upgrading Program, and with good cooperation from the sub-district and provincial authorities. Now that they have obtained tenure rights to their coastal mangrove land, the villagers are now busy designing their new community and housing, with help from CODI's Baan Mankong Community

Upgrading Program. A few notes on what they've been doing :

- **Surveyed the community :** Work started with a survey, which the people conducted themselves, with help from the Phuket Community Network and volunteers from the Chumchon Thai Foundation. Besides collecting information about each family, they studied the village's problems that needed fixing, and the village's good points which need strengthening.
- **Gathered documents and land history :** After the survey, they began gathering documents which prove their long occupation of this land, and with help from the network, they obtained satellite maps showing the village's existence.
- **Started saving for housing :** All the families in the project are now members of the community savings group, in which members save a minimum of 100 Baht per month, towards their housing. Community members can also take small loans from the collective savings for their small vending businesses and cottage production projects. All these savings activities are also preparation for collectively managing their community upgrading budgets.
- **Organized the community :** To manage this flurry of new activities in the village, the people have set up a community management system, with help from the other communities in the Phuket Community Network and 6-Province Tsunami Network. Five committees have been set up to manage activities involving the environment, housing technical issues, youth groups, cultural revival and savings and credit. With seven people on each committee, nearly half the village's population is now active in steering the community's revival!
- **Set up occupation groups :** To beef up their incomes, the community has set up occupation groups, making fishing nets, fish-trap baskets and miniature wooden boats to sell to tourists.

- New houses** : As part of the Baan Mankong Upgrading Program, several community members will take loans from CODI to rebuild their houses. Those who cannot afford loans will rebuild their simple bamboo and timber houses and upgrade them later. Through a series of design workshops, the people have designed a house model which retains all the elements of their traditional sea gypsy houses, but uses slightly stronger, more permanent materials that will require less expense in long-term maintenance. The breezy, wooden houses are built up on stilts to accommodate seasonal flooding and to minimize the environmental impact in this fragile mangrove eco-system.



UPGRADING PLANS :

The community at Hin Look Dio has now completed their plans for developing infrastructure and new housing on the 0.56-Hectare new land, and their plans have been approved for upgrading assistance by CODI's Baan Mankong Upgrading Program as follows :

• Demolishing old structures and filling the new land :	Baht 87,750	(\$2,372)
• Constructing an elevated walkway (2m x 230 meters) :	Baht 300,600	(\$8,124)
• Constructing 12 community toilets (in 3 blocks, 4 seats each) :	Baht 436,170	(\$11,788)
• Individual household kitchen waste-water treatment systems :	Baht 324,000	(\$8,757)
• Installing a piped water supply system (2" x 230 meters) :	Baht 30,455	(\$823)
• Planting trees :	Baht 20,400	(\$551)
• Constructing a community center :	Baht 151,100	(\$4,084)
• TOTAL BUDGET :	Baht 1,350,475	(\$ 36,500)

