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Mines bring low yield with high damage, says official

Despite massive exploitation of manganese in East Nusa Tenggara (NTT), with the environment consequently suffering extensive destruction, the mining has contributed only two percent of the province's income, said a government official. Belu Deputy Regent Lodovikus Taolin said over 90 percent of the forests in his regency had been damaged, largely due to the manganese exploitation which includes traditional mining activities.

Lodovikus blamed the destruction on companies' failures to utilize environmental impact analyses. "Every investor wanting to mine in Belu regency is obliged to meet the prevailing regulations," Lodovikus said at a seminar on future mining in NTT in Kupang on Thursday.

More than 200 licensed mining companies are currently operating in Kupang, South Timor Tengah, North Timor Tengah, Belu, Manggarai, West Manggarai and a number of other regencies in the province.

The environmental hazards they have caused are also considered to accelerate the disappearance of productive fields in the region. Many fear landslides and prolonged droughts are looming. A participant of the seminar, legislator Sarah Lery Mboeik of NTT electoral district, expressed concern, especially for local workers who she said were marginalized.

She said most of the mining companies operating in the province treated local communities as workers. "In fact, they are owners of the manganese-rich fields," Sarah said. With such treatment, investors controlled the commodity's price and ignored the people's economic empowerment in the process. Additionally, security apparatuses that should protect the people, in practice, defend the investors' interests because of bribes.

Sarah cited a case in which Naioni sub-district head was shot by a police officer who a businessman had paid to escort trucks transporting manganese. Another speaker, director of special crime of the National Police's detective and crime body Brig. Gen. Suhardi Alius confirmed the involvement of numerous police officers in mining mafia by providing protection to illicit investors.

"We were forced to dismiss them because of such involvement," said Suhardi, adding that the fired officials ranged from those working at the police precinct level up to the national police level.

Sarah also said that since manganese mining started to flourish in 2008 in the province, at least 54 people, some of whom were women and children, were reported to have died from landslides during mining.

"The companies employing them did not provide them with insurance or compensation, arguing that they [the victims] were conducting people's mining activities," Sarah said.

Across NTT, more than one million hectares of fields are controlled by mining investors while over 50 percent of the province's population lives in poverty, according to reports.