

Bishop urges a stop of manganese mining in W. Timor

Atambua Bishop Mgr. Dominikus Saku Pr. called on manganese miners in West Timor, East Nusa Tenggara (NTT), to immediately halt their activities and urged the government not to process more than 400 license proposals submitted by investors for mining activities.

"The cash that the people directly receive from mining activities is not comparable to the damage to the environment that the [mining] activities have caused," Dominikus said in Kefamenanu, North Timor Tengah rency, Thursday.

He said that mining activities had damaged the environment in the region and people had been leaving behind their main occupation as farmers. He added that West Timor had been experiencing a cultural crisis, in which people wanted to earn money easily without considering the environmental impacts.

Statistics show that 72.6 percent of the NTT population are elementary school graduates and 87 percent earn their living as farmers, a livelihood mainly dependent on muscle.

"It's the government's task to make people capable of working smartly and not just flattening them by distributing rice for the poor or letting them destroy the nature by mining manganese stones," Dominikus said.

NTT Local Capacity and Institutional Building's (Pikul) advocacy manager Pantoro Tri Kuswardono, who is also an activist of the Mining Advocacy Network (Jatam), said that impoverished traditional miners were victims.

"They work almost round the clock, risking black lung disease, one of deadliest diseases," Pantoro said.

He said over 30 people had died during the last three years because of traditional mining activities in the region. He said that nobody, including the government and investors, feels responsible for the conditions.

North Timor Tengah Lakmas Cendana Wangi director Viktor Manbait said that some 500 children in the region were suspected to have black lung symptoms, including flu and respiratory infections. Many of these were children who had been taken to mining sites by their parents.

"Unless something is done about it, they will experience mass deaths in the next five to 10 years ahead," Viktor said, adding that 134 children under five years old in Nian subdistrict, Central Miomafo district, had been receiving routine medical treatments in community health centers for respiratory diseases.

NTT Forum for the Environment (Walhi) director Hery Naif said the biggest threat of the sporadic manganese mining in West Timor was the damage to productive land, landslides and death caused by black lung disease.

"People's mining is a serious threat for Timor Island whose soil structure is very unstable," Hery said.