

Locals upset with mining operations : NTT Regent

Locals in West Manggarai, East Nusa Tenggara, believe mining investors and previous local government administrations conducted untransparent deals to exploit natural resources, the regency's head says. Protests against mining operations have escalated over fears the local administration was shifting the focus of its efforts to spur the local economy to mining-based rather than tourism-based projects, as had been previously hoped, West Manggarai Regent Agustinus Dula said. Speaking at a seminar titled "Public veto on mining areas as Constitutional rights", he said the absence of good communication between investors and residents had prompted locals to reject the mining projects.

"What is happening in West Nusa Tenggara is that there is almost no communication between investors and local people about the plans to open mining operations," he said.

"People have no information about the benefits they will get from mining firms. This then increases the rejections."

In his presentation, Agustinus spoke about the Batu Gosok gold mine, which spans an area of 2,831 hectares. The previous administration issued an exploration permit on gold mining to investors from China in 2008, he said. A year later, a new permit was issued for the same location but the administration changed the name of the area in the concession from Batu Gosok to Gosongea and Toro Sitangga.

"It seems that the change was made unilaterally by the local administration to dodge a 2005 bylaw stipulating that Batu Gosok is a tourism area," Agustinus, who was deputy regent at the time, said. Batu Gosok, located in a mountainous area, borders protected forests and lies about 40 meters from the shoreline. In 2010 Agustinus ran for the regency office and won. He reviewed the permits of all of the mining companies operating in the regency and found that the previous administrations had issued nine licenses for mining companies, mostly for gold mining, he said.

He also found that most of the companies had not produced mandatory environmental impact analysis, locally known as Amdal. Agustinus said he had ordered the companies to postpone operations until he had finished reviewing them. West Nusa Tenggara regency broke off from Manggarai regency in 2003. The regency spans an area of 2,945 square kilometers, and is inhabited by more than 220,000 people.

Local protests against mining operations had been on the rise of late, the activists spoke at the seminar. Locals protested for the most part because they felt they were not getting financial benefits from the mining operations in their area and because of environmental damage caused by the mining.

The Mining Advocacy Network (Jatam) and the Indonesian Environmental Forum (Walhi) said that a number of villages located near coal mines in Kalimantan had no electricity. They said the government should not issue mining concessions for areas that overlapped with protected forest areas. Data compiled by Jatam showed that a number of permits had been issued for mining activities to operate in national parks, including in Batang Gadis National Park in North Sumatra, Laiwangi Wanggameti National Park in East Nusa Tenggara, Tangkoko Dua Saudara National Park in North Sulawesi and Lalobata National Park in North Maluku.

A senior official at the Energy and Mineral Resources Ministry, Tatang Sabaruddin, said that problematic mining permits were not his office's problem. "Mining permit issuance is under the discretion of the local administrations," Tatang said.