

Deforestation - always silent yet devastating

Yansen,

Amid news about a massive 9.0 Richter scale earthquake and a powerful tsunami that have hit Japan, there was little reporting about a flash flood that struck Pidie Regency in Aceh. Scores of people died, hundreds of homes were devastated and many residents were displaced (The Jakarta Post, March 14). Torrential rain around Halimon Mountain, a place where Hasan Tiro proclaimed the free Aceh movement in 1976, created an inland tsunami which washed away several villages in Tangse district.

When the governor of Aceh, Irwandi Yusuf, visited the location, he insisted that illegal logging was the main cause of the flooding. Illegal logging is truly a kind of forestry-related crime that has significant economic and ecological impacts. Thousands of hectares of forests have been damaged by this activity. As a result, environmental destruction has become worse and natural disasters such as flooding have become commonplace.

Aceh is repeatedly affected by flash flooding due to illegal logging. At the end of 2010, several areas in South Aceh were besieged by flooding. In 2006, this inland tsunami resulted in huge losses in Aceh Tamiang. Flash flooding due to deforestation is much scarier since logs are swept up by the water. Consequently, loss of life and properties is unavoidable.

Lowland areas are really in danger if forests in hilly areas are cleared. It is no wonder therefore that flash flooding has become a common phenomenon in Bukit Barisan Range in Sumatra. We also have not forgotten the catastrophic flooding in Wasior, Papua, due to similar circumstances as those in Pidie.

Illegal logging remains widespread and rampant in Indonesia. According to Luca Tacconi et al. (2003), it is possible that illegal logging is being carried out by legal forest companies. They may be illegally harvesting forests by abusing their legal concessions and forest management regulations and cutting forests outside of their concessions. Logging may even be occurring in protected areas. Aceh, home to the much of Sumatra's rain forests, has been suffering massive forest destruction due to long-term forest concession exploitation.

However, illegal occupations by common people are also terrible. Some of the villagers are utilized by industries in order to get cheap wood. Others are cutting down protected and conservation areas for agriculture. The Pidie local government, for example, has been desperate to stop illegal logging by its people. In fact, a lot of illegally occupied forest areas were actually ecologically important for the ecosystem in Halimon Mountain.

The potential disasters that may happen due to illegal logging cannot be under estimated. In the last six months we have witnessed significant losses of human's life because deforestation related flash flooding in Papua and Aceh. Will we let more casualties to occur in future?

Unfortunately, deforestation-related flooding frequently attracts less attention and is not properly addressed. In the case of the Pidie disaster, we have not heard about any response from the central government despite that the local government has said it is not able to provide all necessary funds to

handle the disaster. In many cases, the handling of similar disasters, such as the one in Wasior, the only visible government response was a ceremonial visit.

Given the fact that deforestation and illegal logging rates are still high, it can be assumed that flash floods due to deforestation will continue to occur. The change in climate pattern will complicate the problem. The prolonged wet season with higher intensity of rain makes disasters to be possible to occur at any time all over the country.

Ironically, more often than not disasters do not prompt preventative measures. Even, natural disasters are often perceived as routine events. As one incident is usually followed by another and then forgotten, reaction to disasters has become banal, thus reducing our sense of the need to anticipate and to manage their effects. Contrarily, because disasters are common, we need institutions and social resilience to face them.

Alternative ways to anticipate more complicated problems regarding illegal logging and deforestation are also not well appreciated. A forest logging moratorium, which is hoped to be an effective way to reduce forest degradation, is just a dead concept. The plan to apply the forest logging moratorium, for example, as of January 2011 as part of the REDD+ (reducing emission from deforestation and forest degradation) scheme has still not been implemented.

On the other hand, the lack of ecological literacy in our society and the need for land for agriculture has left community living around forest areas with no choice but to occupy forests. Local governments seem to be desperate to stop illegal occupation of forests.

Regrettably, governmental programs to reduce such illegal settling, as well as improving community welfare, such as community forestry, are not well implemented. We understand the people's need for land to sustain their lives. However, allowing illegal occupation and logging in flood prone areas does not save their lives; quite the opposite.

We need to seriously address illegal logging and occupation by companies as well as by the people by implementing proposed programs such as the logging moratorium and community forestry. We do not want the frequent events of natural disasters to create negligence and lack of awareness. The combination of state negligence in managing environmental resources and the society's lacking awareness of ecological consequences will only produce more disasters in the future.

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