

West Sumbawa struggles to curb illegal mining

The practice of illegal gold mining carried out by residents since 2009 and at one point curbed in 2012, is once again mushrooming in West Sumbawa, West Nusa Tenggara (NTB).The West Sumbawa reGENCY administration recorded more than 1,000 gold extractors and 300 rotating barrels operating in six of eight districts across the reGENCY.A gold extractor is a steel barrel that rotates to crush rocks containing gold. To separate gold, the gold extracting process uses mercury.

In Senteluk village, Taliwang district, for example, dozens of extractors operate freely only a few meters from the main road connecting Poto Tano Port and Taliwang.

“We use mercury in the process. Sometimes we get gold, sometimes not,” said illegal gold miner Fatah, 28, in Taliwang.Fatah and several of his colleagues carry out gold mining around Tano Hill. The rocks obtained from mining activities are then taken downhill for processing.Fatah pays between Rp 35,000 (US\$3) and Rp 50,000 to the owner of the gold extractors for each sack of rocks.

“If I’m lucky, I can get 2 grams of gold from 10 sacks of rocks,” he said.According to Fatah, earning a living as an illegal gold miner brings blessings to his family. Despite the hard and risky work, the yields are comparable. He claimed he could earn Rp 4 million in two weeks if he was lucky.“The earnings are more reliable than farming or plying a trade as an ojek [motorcycle taxi] driver, so I prefer doing this job,” he said.

For those operating gold extractors, they will keep earning as long as there are still many miners working.Abdurrahman, 45, who runs a gold extracting business in Brang Rea district, claimed he could process up to 50 sacks of rocks daily.He operates his 12 gold extractors and dumps liquid waste in the nearby river. He said he was unaware that mercury was harmful to the environment.

“The reGENCY administration curbed illegal miners in 2012 due to the environmental impact. But they have mushroomed again since the end of 2013, and currently the illegal practice has expanded to six of the eight districts in West Sumbawa,” West Sumbawa Deputy Regent Mala Rahman told The Jakarta Post on Friday.

More than 5,000 people are estimated to be involved in the illegal practice in the reGENCY. They do not only come from West Sumbawa and Sumbawa, but also from Lombok Island and even as far as Kalimantan and West Java.Besides the risk of deforestation, the reGENCY administration is also concerned that illegal gold mining can cause environmental damage as the traditional method is still being used.

The practice also often claims the lives of miners due to occupational hazards while mining.To overcome the issue, Rahman said his office had developed a community-based mining concept by joining forces with the private sector.It is aimed at localizing and controlling mining sites, miners’ safety and eco-friendly gold processing.

Rahman said his office was making efforts to localize the mines to prevent illegal activity from expanding.He said the reGENCY administration would also disseminate information on the environmental impact of mercury, which could threaten the environment as well as people’s health in the long run.