

Slashing, burning and digging in the heart of the forest

One man passing by the tour group on a motorcycle stopped to warn visitors about going too far into the forest. "There are gaping mining pits, some still active and others no longer used. Unless you take great care, you could plunge into the holes."

The man, Zulkifli, says he has been living in a village near Krueng Sabee for years and working as a miner for 5 years.

Things changed, he said, after the tsunami hit Aceh in 2004 and the Helsinki Peace Accord between the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) separatist insurgency and the government was signed in 2005.

"Many people were unemployed and the easiest solution was reclaiming land or opening mines," the 56-year-old said. Since then, he adds, the gold mines in the area have either been ignored or worked extensively.

Forests have been opened to prospectors while other land has been converted to agriculture.

"Farmers usually fell and burn trees before growing crops," Zulkifli said, adding that he realized that opening land to mining and agriculture would hinder conservation. "But we need to make a living and children have school expenses. The only place nearby is the forest zone adjacent to the village settlements."

In the end, Zulkifli has mixed feelings. He is deeply concerned over the life he is leading, but thinks it's necessary.

He knows that children growing up over the next 40 years in nearby villages will be affected by mercury contamination.

"They may be my own children or grandchildren," Zulkilfi says. "They will suffer from skin disease, cancer or even have no offspring."