

Coal mining threatens temple complex

Experts have warned that the Muarojambi temple complex in South Sumatra could be seriously damaged by industrial activities conducted by oil palm plantations and coal mining in the area adjacent to the ancient world heritage site. University of Indonesia archeologist Mundardjito said on Thursday that man-made disasters caused by pollution from coal mining and forest conversion for oil palm plantations had jeopardized efforts to preserve the temple complex.

“Some of the underground sites are increasingly threatened by coal stockpiled in the surrounding area, including in some areas under which lie unrecovered artifacts. It is also in danger from the acidic water from the coal, which can cause serious damage to the artifacts still buried in the area,” he said during the launch of the “Save Muarojambi” movement.

Activists, academics and history buffs have joined hands to start a movement, some of it online to save the historic site. He said that failure to protect Muarojambi could end with the country losing one of the most outstanding religious centers from the world’s ancient era.

The Muarojambi temple complex covers an area of 2,612 hectares along the banks of the Batanghari River. The complex, consisting of 82 temples, was built during the Melayu and Sriwijaya kingdom between the 7th and 14th centuries. Most of the temples represent a Buddhist culture, and a few of them are Hindi. Kedaton is the largest temple in the complex.

Prior to an excavation effort in 1975, the complex was covered in vegetation. Chairman of the Association of Indonesia Archeologists (IAAI) Junus Satrio Atmodjo said it was critical to protect the Muarojambi site as it was considered the biggest and most populous ancient settlement on Sumatra. The human settlement, which was thought to have first developed 700 years ago, could indicate the region’s geopolitical importance in Southeast Asia during ancient times.

“In the global context, it had a vital economic role in the region as it was a transit harbor along the maritime silk-trade route,” he said.

Traders from the Middle East, South Asia, other parts of Southeast Asia and East Asia once settled in Muarojambi, and made not only commercial but also diplomatic contacts.

Muarojambi was also considered the center of Buddhism in Asia, together with Cambodia, Java, Thailand and Tibet. It then became the center of Buddhist teachings after Nalanda in India. It was also widely acknowledged that Dharmakirti, a famous Buddhist monk from Sumatra, developed a particular Buddhist tradition called “Sherling Pa”, which means the teachings of people from Suwarnadwipa or Sumatra or Jambi.

This scholarly tradition became the basis of Buddhist reform in Tibet.

“The destruction of Muarojambi will obscure the vital role of Jambi in the history of human civilization,” Junus said.

Currently, seven companies run their operation in Kemingking, a subdistrict to the south of Batanghari River. The operation includes six coal stockpiling sites run by local companies and one crude palm oil company. The land clearing operation for palm oil plantation north of the complex also poses a serious threat to the archeological site. M. Husnul Abid, an activist from Jambi Arts Council (DKJ), said that companies running the coal stockpiling operation had in fact secured a permit from the Muarojambi local administration.

“The local government argues that as long as their operation does not take place at the site and cause damage directly to the temple complex, then they are fine,” Husnul said.