

Environment Watch: Administrations move to save regions from mining impact

The Palu municipality, Central Sulawesi, has challenged critics, especially gold mine owners, over its policy on illegal mining activities in Poboya. The administration has revoked two clauses in municipal regulations about mining, which have so far been the legal reference for thousands of gold miners in Poboya. Palu Mayor Rusdi Mastura said the revocation of the regulations was necessary because mining affairs had been handed over to the Central Sulawesi provincial administration. "Sue me if you dare. I will definitely be there," Rusdi said Wednesday, in response to threats that he would be sued for his move. He said that the revocation was a form of his obedience as a mayor to the province's governor, who is his superior. "Besides, the municipal regulations are no longer advantageous."

Since mining activities have operated in Poboya, he said, the use of dangerous chemical agents are increasingly uncontrolled, causing environmental damage, and polluting water resources in the region.

"Who will assume responsibility when the use of mercury and cyanide has started to threaten the health of the Palu people?" he said. He said that to deal with the problem, there was no other way but to put an end to the mining activities and tell the miners to leave the area. Otherwise, stern action will be taken, as they will be considered illegal miners. Separately, Central Sulawesi Police chief, Brig. Gen. Dewa Parsana, said that a familiarization team concerning the closure of mining sites had been deployed to inform people not to continue their mining activities in Poboya. The measure was taken following the issuance on Monday of Central Sulawesi Governor Decree on curbing illegal logging activities in the subdistricts of Poboya, Kawatuna and Lasoani in Palu. Dewa said the miners were given until Sept. 3 to obey the instruction.

Meanwhile, in Kupang, East Nusa Tenggara (NTT), Governor Frans Leburaya has sent a survey team to investigate a report on alleged gold exploration activities by PT Fathi Resources inside the Laiwanggi Wanggameti National Park in Pinupahar district, East Sumba regency. "If the team finds any indication of exploration activities, PT Fathi should obtain a permit from the Forestry Minister before resuming its operations," Frans said, Thursday. Separately PT Fathi Resources executive director Ahmad Chandra said that the allegation was not true, as the license issued for his company was for an area outside the national park.

"We have a mining site of 99,000 hectares that are located outside the protected forest," he said. He added that drilling activities were done manually and did not involve the use of heavy equipment or dangerous chemical agents that are hazardous to the environment. "We have 41 drilling spots. None of them are inside the national park," he maintained. Meanwhile, an official report issued on Thursday by the NTT branch of the Indonesian Environment Forum (Walhi) indicated that there had been massive logging inside the park. "This will influence the protected flora and fauna, including the tropical endemic birds," the branch's program manager, Hery Naif, said.

He said that the 47,014-hectare Wanggameti national park was located in the middle of PT Fathi's 346,500-hectare mining site located in the four regencies of East Sumba, West Sumba, Central Sumba and Southwest Sumba. This, according to Hery, violates a 2009 circular issued by the Energy and Mineral Resources Ministry, which stipulates that drilling activities should be conducted at a minimum distance of 500 meters from the outermost border of the national park.

"In fact, they are located just a few meters away from the border line," Hery said.