

Strong local demand inviting electronic waste dumping

A recent global pledge to ban exports of toxic waste has not stemmed the flow of outdated electronic products to Indonesia, activists say. On Friday, Indonesia and Switzerland brokered the agreement at the UN environmental conference in Cartagena, Colombia, to accelerate the adoption of a global ban on the export of hazardous wastes, including old electronics, to developing countries.

Dyah Paramita, an environmentalist from the Indonesian Center for Environmental Law (ICEL), argued that the agreement would have little effect in Indonesia's case, as the demand for old electronics was still robust in the country. She suggested that the government remind Indonesians about the danger posed by using old electronics, commonly known as e-waste.

"In Indonesia, demand for [old electronics] is still strong... this is where the danger lurks," Dyah told The Jakarta Post on Sunday.

"The probability of suffering the hazardous effects of [e-waste] is still high, as the materials and spare-parts are frequently replaced by people using their bare hands and the unused spare-parts are usually burned" she added.

The ICEL researcher also urged the government to establish stern regulations on how industries managed their hazardous wastes. Currently, there is no strong regulation on how to deal with old and broken electronics in the country.

"In European countries, industries already have their own facilities to deal with their e-waste as [European] governments oblige them to do so. In Indonesia, e-waste management is still voluntary, there has yet to be any regulation requiring industries to manage their e-waste," Dyah said.

The head of advocacy for the Indonesian Forum for the Environment (Walhi) Mulki Friatna argued that the ban on e-waste exporting must be followed by a zero-waste policy in industrial countries, as the ban would not stop the smuggling of obsolete electronics to developing countries.

"Industrial countries should promote strategies that encourage zero-waste or green products policy, meaning products [that they manufacture] do not contain hazardous materials at all," Mulki said.

The recently agreed consensus involving more than 170 countries at the UN environmental conference in Cartagena, Colombia, on Friday, would enforce the Basel Convention, which obliges all countries to manage their own hazardous waste.

Many developing countries, including Indonesia, have been notorious "dumping grounds" for various outdated electronic products that come from developed countries with brawny industrial sectors. The deal, which had been thoroughly discussed and debated for more than 10 years, was hailed by environmental group Basel Action Network (BAN) as a major breakthrough.

"I'm ecstatic," BAN executive director Jim Puckett told AP.

"I've been working on this since 1989 and it really does look like the shackles are lifted and we'll see this thing happen in my lifetime."

The deal seeks to ensure that developing countries no longer become dumping grounds for toxic waste including industrial chemicals, discarded computers and cell phones as well as obsolete ships laden with asbestos, Puckett said. (sat)