

Ministry on the defensive after scathing deforestation report

The government says that a global risk analysis and mapping company has compiled a "misleading" report claiming that the rate of deforestation in Indonesia was one of the worst in the world.

"The study is misleading if it is used to picture Indonesia's current deforestation rate because Indonesia has been implementing a two-year moratorium on issuing new licenses to clear primary forests and peatlands since May last year, and also has selectively issued licenses for tree cutting," Forestry Ministry secretary-general Hadi Daryanto told The Jakarta Post on Friday.

Hadi said that Indonesia had decreased deforestation to 700,000 hectares as of 2010. "I believe that the number will be even smaller [considering] this year's reduction," he said.

Maplecroft released a study on Thursday showing that Nigeria, Indonesia and North Korea had the world's highest rates of deforestation, while the top two greenhouse polluters, China and the US, had the lowest rates. The company said that growing demand for food and biofuels, rising populations, poverty and corruption were driving deforestation in developing countries.

However, Hadi said that Indonesia's deforestation rate was very high between 1999 and 2002 due to Indonesia's political transition.

"We were losing 3.5 million hectares of forest a year until 2003, but the number went down to 1.1 million hectares in 2009," he said. According to a report compiled by South Dakota State University in the US, Kalimantan and Sumatra lost 5.4 million hectares of forest, 9.2 percent of their total forested area, between 2000 and 2008.

The university's researchers as well as researchers from the London School of Economics and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, have highlighted the link between Indonesia's fluctuating deforestation rate and its election cycle. According to the researchers, illegal logging increased before elections but fell significantly thereafter, showing that Indonesian politicians relied on funding from logging, plantation, and mining companies to fund their campaigns. Iwan Wibisono, World Wildlife Fund (WWF) Indonesia's forest and climate policy coordinator, told the Post that Indonesia's deforestation rate was still high.

"It is decreasing but it's not enough. Stakeholders must work together to keep decreasing deforestation in the country," he said. The Indonesian Forum for the Environment (Wahli) campaign manager Deddy Ratih said that Maplecroft's study depicted the true condition of Indonesia's forests, predicting that deforestation would increase due to a change in the forest spatial management plan (RTRW) that would allot 50 percent of the land for business. Deddy added that the moratorium would not work if the government failed to acknowledge practices in the field or failed to punish local officials who broke the law.

Wahli said that 3.7 million hectares of forest in Central Kalimantan, 4 million hectares in West Kalimantan, and 1.6 million hectares in Merauke, Papua, were slated to be cleared this year by businesses.

"The areas are yet to be functionally transferred but the local governments have issued permits clearing them. We also note that there are three oil palm plantation companies that are requesting licenses to operate in Moluccas," he said.

"Indonesian officials seem to ignore the future impacts of deforestation and focus only on the financial benefits they might earn when issuing permits. They forget that careless land clearing will destroy us," Deddy said. Ongoing deforestation would increase the intensity of flooding in Indonesia and intensify disasters caused by climate change, he added. "The conflict between human and animals will worsen if we don't seriously handle it. More animals will lose their habitats due to land clearing and therefore force them to attack people. This has been happening at different provinces such as Sumatra and Kalimantan."

A Sumatran tiger attacked 5-year-old Fitria binti Judin in Bengkulu in August this year. A month later, another tiger also attacked 18-year-old Milyan in another part of the province. Rampant deforestation is also said to be behind the near extinction of several animals, including Sumatran tigers and orangutans.

There are only 400 Sumatran tigers and 50,000 orangutans left in the wild. (msa)