

Group accuses Aceh leader of peatland destruction

An Acehnese civil society group says it has reported Aceh Governor Irwandi Yusuf to the National Police for issuing a business licence to a company to convert 1,605 hectares in Tripa Swamp, Aceh, into a palm oil plantation.

Koalisi Masyarakat Peduli Tripa (Community Coalition for Tripa Swamp) said it had also reported six other officials allegedly involved in the business license issuance, including the Nagan Raya regent and the heads of Aceh's forestry and plantation agency, land agency (BPN) and integrated permit service agency (BP2T).

Tripa Swamp is part of the Leuser Ecosystem Area (KEL), located along the west coast of Aceh, which comprises vast swaths of peatlands rich in biodiversity, including the world's largest orangutan population.

Irawandi imposed a moratorium on forest conversion in the area in 2007.

"The governor announced the forest moratorium in 2007, but he broke his promise by issuing the permit licence for the company," Kamaruddin, the lawyer representing the coalition, said in Jakarta on Tuesday.

The coalition's document showed that the Aceh governor had issued a permit to the company on Aug. 25 of this year.

The company had first requested the permit from the Nagan Raya regent in 2007.

"The issuance of the license for the company to develop Tripa Swamp is a criminal violation of spatial planning. The government should protect the area for the people's sake," Sexio Yuni Noor, another lawyer, said.

Riswan, a spartial planning expert focusing on Aceh and North Sumatra, said that half of the total 60,000-hectare area of Tripa Swamp had been converted into palm oil plantations.

At least four companies have licenses to develop plantations in the swamp, Riswan said. The companies are PT Astra Agro Lestari, PT Gelora Sawit Makmur, PT Cemerlang Abadi and PT Patriot Guna Sakti.

The four companies attained official land use certificates (HGU) from the central government before the governor announced the moratorium.

Riswan said that the latest licence issued by Irwandi could further reduce the peatland, and disturb the environmental balance.

"The company has worked in the area even though they do not have HGUs. They have converted the peatland, burned the plants and created canals for the plantations. This has disturbed the orangutans and other animals there," Riswan said.

Sexio said that the coalition demanded that the governor revoke the business licences and restore the Tripa Swamp to its original state.

The Aceh governor could not be reached for comment.

Tripa Swamp is well-known for being home to the world's largest population of Sumatran orangutans (*Pongo abelii*).