

Govt told to revoke concession permit



Silenced: Protesters from Padang Island in Riau province sew their mouths to protest the environmental destruction caused by the logging activities of PT Riau Andalan Pulp and Paper (RAPP). The protesters, who camped outside the House of Representatives building, called on the Riau government to revoke the operating permit for the company. JP/Jerry Adiguna

No one argues when regional administrations rely on local resources to produce income. But when they invite investors to exploit those resources, villagers are the first to suffer the effects. This has been the case with residents of flood-prone Pulau Padang, a small island in Riau province. They have been facing environmental woes since the local administration gave a multinational timber company a license to exploit peat land forests in their area. The concession permit granted to the company means that local people no longer have access to the forests which have for generations been their livelihood. "Not only has the concession robbed the people's land, it has also brought ecological damage," said Muhammad Ridwan, a Pulau Padang villager.

Muslim, a community leader in the village, said some areas were now prone to flooding after the company cleared forests for infrastructure developments. "It makes us more prone to natural calamities as most of the land in Pulau Padang is peat land," he said, adding that peat lands were crucial to protecting tiny islands from high waves or even tsunamis. Ridwan and Muslim are two villagers of Bagan Melibur, a village in Pulau Padang heavily affected by the operations of PT Riau Andalan Pulp and Paper (RAPP). On Thursday, they filed complaints to the Forestry Ministry and demanded the ministry revoke the concession permit. Along with their fellows, they had been staging a protest in front of the House of Representatives (DPR) over the past month. Some protesters took extreme action by sewing their lips shut to show their opposition to PT RAPP's presence on their land.

RAPP, a subsidiary of Indonesian pulp and paper giant Asia Pacific Resources International Ltd. (APRIL), obtained a license from the Forestry Ministry to clear 23,914 hectares of peat land forest on the island. Overall, the concession obtained by the company spans 41,205 hectares. It covers five regencies and municipalities, comprising the Meranti Islands, Kampar, Kuantan Singingi, Pelalawan and Siak. The Forestry Minister issued the company with exploitation license No.327/2009 dated June 12, 2009, before the Meranti Islands regency separated from Bengkalis regency. The granting of the license has caused tensions as local people are worried that the land clearing will affect their livelihoods. "The RAPP must refrain from pulping peat land forest on our island," Ridwan said. Data showed that the potential of the peat land forest in the concession of PT RAPP which plans to build pulpwood plantations in Pulau Padang reached an estimated 60 and 90 cubic meters per hectare.

"This means that with the 23,914 hectares of peat land forest it targets to exploit, the company will obtain between 1.43 and 2.15 million cubic meters of raw materials from natural peat land forests for use in its pulp and paper plants in the province," said Greenomics Indonesia executive director Elfian Bachtiar.

Intsianawati Ayus, a member of the Regional Representative Council (DPD), said that the government must revise the permit letter which gave five regencies and municipalities in Riau, including Bengkalis regency, a license to exploit natural forests and peat lands in the province. Representing the Forestry Ministry during the meeting, Bambang Soepijanto, Director General of Forestry Planning at the Forestry Ministry, said that the forestry minister could not revoke the granted permission without an order from the Meranti Islands regent. "The forestry minister is unlikely to act on his own initiative to either grant or revoke a license without any recommendation from regent or major," he told The Jakarta Post, referring to the Law on Regional Autonomy. The 2009 law stipulates that local governments from the regency, municipality and provincial levels are the only entity with the authority to issue exploitation permits for production forests and protected forests in their areas. Kusnan Rahmin, the RAPP's president director, said that his company's operation in Pulau Padang was legal.

"We haven't even started any operational activities, yet we have faced a string of violent attacks, endangering not only our employees but also the lives of local communities," he said, referring to arson attacks in May, June and July last year, which destroyed excavators and killed a contractor.

He rejected accusations that the presence of his company would endanger the island's environment and the livelihoods of its people. "We will plant only on 26 percent of the total 110,000 hectares of Pulau Padang," he said.

