

## NGO says deforestation worsens Siberut flooding

Conservationists in Padang, West Sumatra, have blamed forest concession holders (HPH) and timber exploitation permits (IPK) on, for the worsening floods on Siberut, one of the Mentawai Islands.

From April 5, floods covered five districts on the island for five days. It was the worst flooding ever seen on Siberut. Eleven homes were swept away or severely damaged. Three elementary schools, two community health clinics and more than 1,000 homes were swamped by up to 3 meters deep water.

Although no casualties were reported, around 7,000 people were forced flee and take refuge elsewhere. Most of them had not returned home by Thursday.

Mentawai Mandiri Citra Foundation (YCMM) executive director Berta Letisia Sarogdok said high rainfall was not the only cause of the flooding.

“The situation is worsened by damage to forests upstream through illegal logging, and the fact that the soil on Siberut is mostly clay with a low capacity to absorb water,” Berta said in Padang on Thursday.

The floods came from rivers originating in former HPH and IPK areas. The floods in Rogdok, Salappak, Tinambu, Magosi, Muntei and Maileppet villages in South Siberut were caused by the overflowing Siberut, a river which originates in the former HPH area of PT Cahaya Pharmin Siberut.

The floods in Bojakan, Sotboyak, derived from the former HPH area of Andalas Madani Cooperative, owned by Andalas University. Floods in Saibi village in Central Siberut come from the same source.

The floods in Pepei village in Northwest Siberut come from former IPK areas of Kostam and Kosum Cooperatives.

“Several other locations were also affected by overflowing rivers with catchment areas denuded by former HPH, including PT Salaki Summa Sejahtera which is still in operation.

Executive director of West Sumatra chapter of the Indonesian Forum for the Environment (Walhi), Khalid Syaifullah, said the floods were due to former exploitative policies by various administrations, which had given no consideration to the future impact.

“That’s why we strongly oppose the government’s plan to turn former HPH and IPK areas into large-scale oil palm plantations on Siberut because it will only make things worse in the future,” said Berta.

Mentawai regency has set a flood emergency response period of two weeks until April 20. West Sumatra Disaster Mitigation Agency and other agencies have started distributing relief aid to the locations by boat. Isolated locations are difficult to reach due to huge waves up to 6 meters high.

Mentawai Vice Regent Rijel Samaloisa said his office was focusing on helping victims, but it could take a long time to reach all the victims in isolated areas due to rough terrain.