

## Illegal mining continues in W. Sumbawa

Officials in West Sumbawa, West Nusa Tenggara (NTB), have failed to curb illegal gold mining in eight districts of the regency. Despite some measures being put in place, West Sumbawa administration has been unable to stop local residents from vigorously pursuing the illegal activity.

Illicit gold mining has reportedly intensified and now takes place in the entire eight districts in the regency. West Sumbawa Mining, Energy and Mineral Resources and Tourism office head Hajamuddin said illegal mining in the regency had been rampant since 2009.

The local administration has tried to curb the illegal operations and informed the public of its dangers, but the practice continues.

Hajamuddin acknowledged that the economic impact from illegal activity in the regency was very significant for the community, as was evident from the economic capability of villagers who could now build nice homes and own motorcycles. "But, we must still consider the environmental impact," he said.

West Sumbawa Regent Zulkifli Muhadli said that attempts to curb the mining activities in the regency were always in vain and it has become a real problem. On one hand, the practice threatens both the environment and public health due to the huge amount of mercury use, but on the other hand, those involved in the activity need to earn a living.

"We are still trying to open community mining zones. We have asked for a number of locations owned by mining companies which can be managed by the community," said Zulkifli.

The uncontrolled illegal gold mining in West Sumbawa is evident from the widespread use of gold extraction equipment in almost every district in the regency. In Senteluk village, for instance, dozens of gold extraction devices were seen operating freely only a few meters from the main road connecting Poto Tano Port and Taliwang.

A gold extractor is made up of rotating barrels to crush gold-bearing rocks and to separate the precious metal, toxic mercury is used.

"Mercury is used in the process. Sometimes we get gold and sometimes none," said a traditional gold miner in Taliwang, Ahmad Fatah, 28.

Fatah and a number of his colleagues usually carry out their activities around Tano Hill. The mined rocks are then carried down the hill for extraction. To process the gold-bearing rocks, Fatah pays between Rp 35,000 (US\$3.80) and Rp 50,000 to the owner of the gold extractor for each sack of rocks. He sometimes obtains gold, but more often not.

"If we're lucky, we could get 2 grams of gold from 10 sacks of rocks. If not, we don't get any. But we still get profit, especially if we get a lot of gold sludge or fine gold particles," he said.

According to Fatah, an illegal gold miner like him is a blessing for the family. Despite being engaged in a risky and tough job, the earnings are reasonable. He said he could earn Rp 4 million in two weeks if he was lucky. "Compared to farming or driving the motorcycle taxi, earnings from gold mining are much higher. That's why I remain doing this job," he said.