

# Global calls to save Aceh forest

More than a million people worldwide have joined online calls for President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono to block the Aceh administration's plan to open protected forests for commercial exploitation. Rudi Putra, an Acehnese activist who won the 2013 Future for Nature Award, initiated an online petition on Avaaz.org on May 7, demanding the President step in to the plan. As of Saturday evening, the number of people who signed the petition, which is directed at the President, Forestry Minister Zulkifli Hasan and Aceh Governor Zaini Abdullah, had reached 1.2 million.

The petition was begun after a group of local environmental activists from Aceh signed an online petition on Change.org Indonesia against the draft spatial planning bylaw proposed by the Aceh administration, which put the province's 1.2 million protected forests, home to numerous endangered species, at risk. More than 35,000 people have signed the petition.

"I live and work in the last place on Earth where endangered orangutans, rhinos, elephants and tigers still roam together, but it'll be bulldozed to bits unless our President hears our call and steps in to save this unique habitat," Rudi said on Avaaz.org, a global web movement that was launched in 2007.

Despite months of continuous protests, the Forestry Ministry is still on the way to approve the bylaw to convert protected forests into non-forest zones. Data from the Coalition of Aceh Rainforest Movements said that the new spatial planning rules would allow the conversion of around 1.2 million hectares of Aceh's existing 3.78 million hectares of protected forests into non-forest areas, production forests as well as roads. However, the Forestry Minister Zulkifli Hasan has denied the accusation saying he has only allowed a conversion of 80,000 hectares of forests, from the initial proposal of 150,000 hectares, solely to improve the province's infrastructure and boost its economy. He also said that the local administration had more authority to protect its forest than the central government, due to regional autonomy.

Deddy Ratih of Indonesian Forum for the Environment (Walhi) said the petition that had grabbed the attention of global communities showed the ministry should take the public's concern and aspirations into account before deciding to go ahead. "The ministry should clearly explain the purpose of the forest conversion and involve the public in the decision," Deddy said. "We are not only talking about the conversion, but also the potential damage should they go on with the plan to construct a road network throughout Aceh's protected forests."

Deddy regretted that the ministry still did not hear the public's concern, even after the President decided to extend the forest moratorium, which prohibits issuance of new exploitation permits for primary forests and peatlands in conservation forests, protected forests and production forests.

"Especially with the fact that the president extended the forest moratorium, the ministry should have had more awareness to protect the forest," he said.

Change.org Indonesia co-founder Usman Hamid said that millions of support for Rudi's petition shows the international community's solidarity for the local online movement to demand that Governor Zaini drop the controversial bylaw. "The government should be open-minded and listen to public aspiration against the plan to convert Aceh's protected forest for business purposes that will damage the earth and put Sumatran endangered species at risk," Usman said.

Ian Bassin, campaign director at Avaaz, said that President Yudhoyono had to make a choice: leaving an important legacy to protect Indonesia's natural resources or tainting his green track record by allowing the Aceh government to go on with its plan.