

Thai firm denies bribing officials to cover up oil spill

Thailand-based oil and gas producer PTTEP Australasia (PTTEP AA) has refuted allegations made by a local environmental group that it had bribed Indonesian academics and officials to cover up the impact of the oil spill in the Timor Sea.

According to the release sent to The Jakarta Post on Monday, the company was fined AUS\$510,000 by Darwin Magistrates' Court in Australia in 2012, in relation to safety and non-safety matters.

The prosecution was not concerned with any allegations of pollution or damage to the environment, the company said.

"PTTEP AA is not aware of proceedings in any court in Australia being commenced on behalf of any Indonesian party for compensation or other relief in relation to the Montara incident, as has been claimed in some Indonesian media reports," the statement read.

Last week, an environmental group in Kupang, East Nusa Tenggara (NTT), Ocean Watch Indonesia (OWI), said that it would file a report to the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) over alleged gratuities given by the oil and gas producer to a number of parties in Indonesia.

OWI alleged that one of the country's top universities was responsible for authoring a report that said there was no scientific evidence to verify that the oil spill had brought environmental degradation to Indonesian waters.

PTTEP AA had decreased its corporate social responsibility (CSR) fund for the victims affected by the oil spill in Indonesia from US\$5 million to \$3 million, to pay the university to conduct confidential research, the environmental group said.

The group also said that the Environment Ministry and the Foreign Ministry's persistence in signing a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with PTTEP AA, was a form of gratuities, because the MoU stipulated that no parties in Indonesia could file a protest on the oil spill that polluted the Timor Sea.

The group saw the MoU — that was signed in 2011 — as a violation of the Environmental Law, which ruled that any citizens have the right to file protests against any polluters.

Meanwhile, the company said that the Australian government had managed a long-term environmental monitoring program to measure any impact from the Montara spill and had concluded that the nearest point to the Indonesian coastline that any oil from Montara had reached was around 94 kilometers from Rote Island.

In July 2012, the Indonesian Center for Energy and Environmental Studies announced that seaweed production in the Timor Sea in 2009 averaged 1,360 kilograms per batch and declined by 71 percent to 400 kilograms per batch after the oil rig incident. Prior to the spill, fishermen caught an average 1.92 tons per trip with a gross income of Rp 17.24 million (US\$1,824), which declined to an average 0.53 tons per trip for a gross income of Rp 3.93 million after the incident. **(nad)**

