

W. Java's multihued river is a stream of stinking waste

The Greenpeace conservation group and the West Java chapter Indonesian Forum for the Environment (Walhi) consider the government and law enforcement agencies powerless to address environmental pollution, especially in the upstream area of the Citarum River in West Java. "The current approach is reactive and not for the long-term," Greenpeace toxin-free water campaign manager Ahmad Ashov said in Bandung. Administrative and criminal sanctions against industries that pollute the environment is sadly lacking. Sanctions should be followed with commitment on all levels to the government on the policy of "zero-dumping" of hazardous chemical substances.

"We must seek a solution that benefits the environment and industry alike. The solution is clean production, and not closure of factories. Industries should be encouraged to not use hazardous substances right from the start, so nothing is being disposed of," said Ashov.

Greenpeace and West Java Walhi recently released a report "Uncontrolled toxic substances". They highlighted eight locations in the upper reaches of Citarum River they believe to be dumping sites for hazardous industrial waste. They found hexavalent chromium, cadmium, alkylphenol and non-biodegradable lead, which have damaged the river ecosystem and potential carcinogens for humans.

The Citarum has played an important role for West Java and Jakarta. Besides providing energy for power plants on the Java and Bali grid, the 269-kilometer river irrigates farmland and fisheries. It supplies 70 percent of the water for Jakarta residents. Chemical waste in Citarum River starts at the Majalaya industrial area in Bandung regency. Most of the industries there dump waste directly into the river. Deni Riswandani, resident of Majalaya, said he could swim and catch fish in the river when he was in elementary school, but not anymore. The water has changed color since Majalaya was designated as the first textile industrial area in West Java in the 1970s.

"The water is sometimes blue, red or black. Chemicals have been dumped continuously, especially in Sasak Bejo area. Every three hours the water changes color, mostly red," said Deni, 40, who lives around 20 kilometers from Cisanti, source of Citarum River. Beside the changes in color, the polluted water also emits an overpowering stench. West Java Environmental Management Agency (BPLHD) environmental management affairs head Prima Mayaningtias said her office had imposed sanctions against 14 companies.

"Some of them have even been reprimanded by the government at the regency and mayoralty levels," said Prima, clarifying that the government has not taken any concrete measures to curtail pollution.

The companies which have received reprimands are in the steel smelting, paper making, cattle-raising and a number of textile industries. Prima said waste was the responsibility of the concerned companies as stipulated in Government Regulation No. 27/2012 on environmental permits. As for the supervision, Prima said her office was faced with limitations, so the West Java BPLHD has opened a complaint post on environmental pollution.

"If the companies are proven to have violated the law, they will face administrative and criminal sanctions, depending on the offence," she said.

"As stipulated in Law No. 32/2009 on environmental management and protection, offenders could face up to three years in prison and a fine of up to Rp 3 billion (US\$333,000). This could serve as a deterrent," Prima added.