

Aceh: logging a conflict zone

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Cover by Fahmi

Aceh, at the northern tip of the Indonesian Island of Sumatra, is a treasure trove of natural wealth which is rapidly being depleted. Here, rainforests are being torn down for quick profit, to make way for plantations and roads, in the name of 'development'. Aceh is also a zone of bitter and protracted armed conflict, where the civilian population is bearing the brunt of the violence. Logging – and the destruction of livelihoods it brings in its wake – only adds to the suffering of the Acehnese.

Aceh: forests in a conflict zone

In Aceh, the social and environmental impacts of resource destruction mean additional pressures on a population that has already suffered so much from the conflict. Aceh has been the scene of a decades-long bloody conflict between the Indonesian security forces and the Free Aceh Movement (GAM). Thousands have been killed, disappeared, tortured in custody and detained without trial. The Indonesian forces' excessive response, which includes village-to-village 'sweepings' to hunt down GAM suspects and sympathisers and terrorising the civilian population, is an approach which only deepens the cycle of resentment and violence. Civil society groups struggling to promote peace have very little room to manoeuvre.

In 2003, after peace talks failed, Jakarta imposed martial law and the military onslaught against the Acehnese resumed. After a year of martial law, during which at least 2,000 people were killed, Amnesty International called on the Indonesian government to stop sacrificing human rights for the sake of security. Amnesty described the situation in Aceh as follows:

"People in Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam (NAD) now live in constant fear of killings, torture and arrest. One year on since the Indonesian government imposed martial law, violence has become so commonplace it is almost impossible for people to live a normal life." (AI press release 11 May, 2004)

In 2004 martial law was officially downgraded to civilian emergency status, but this has not stopped the death toll continuing to rise, or improved hopes of peace.

Logging, which helps finance the military's operations in Aceh has brought its own tragedies. In early 2004, one person was killed, and thousands forced to flee their flooded homes when heavy rains on denuded forest slopes caused flash-flooding in four districts in Aceh. This was the latest in a long history of floods and landslides linked to deforestation.

The conflict in Aceh also makes it dangerous for civil society to speak out against forest destruction – as illustrated recently by the arrest of indigenous and environmental activist Bestari Raden in March 2004 – see box 3.

Box 1: Forest crisis in Indonesia

The wholesale destruction of natural resources throughout Indonesia has thrown the country into a deep ecological crisis. The rate of deforestation is now the highest in the world - official estimates put the annual rate at a staggering 3.8 million hectares per year (*Deutsche Presse-Agentur*, 22 January, 2004). A World Bank report warned that Sumatra's lowland forest – outside protected areas – may have gone by next year.¹

Once vast rainforests have been cleared by destructive logging to feed the timber-based industries that export plywood, pulp, paper, furniture and other wood products to consumer countries. The forests are being felled to make way for large-scale commercial pulpwood and oil palm plantations; for mining, gas and oil projects; for roads and industry. The profits go to the investors, while local communities are left to bear the social and environmental scars.

Indonesia's resource-rich forests provide an estimated 40-65 million indigenous people with their livelihood, cultural identity and home (*DTE, People, Forests & Rights, June 2002*). The wider community – an estimated 100 million people, or almost half the total population – depends on the forests for a huge range of life-sustaining 'ecological services', including

¹ Holmes D, 2000, Deforestation in Indonesia – a Review of the Situation in 1999, World Bank.

clean water, flood and drought prevention, erosion control, local climate regulation and recreation.

What is state of Aceh's forest?

Aceh is home to several types of rainforest, including lowland, montane, swamp and coastal mangrove forests. A total of 4,130,000 hectares were originally classified as forest land (*DTE 47*), but by the mid-1990s over a million hectares of these forests had been degraded (*FWI/GFW, 2002*). In the late 1990s, the Indonesian Government and World Bank estimated forest cover at almost 3.9 million hectares, or 69% of Aceh's total land area of 5.68 million hectares. This was classified by the government as 3.1 m ha of 'permanent forest' – much of which had been allocated to logging companies – and 714,000 ha as 'non permanent forest', or in other words, forests for conversion to non-forest uses (*Ministry of Forestry, 2000*). By 2000, 246,000 hectares of forests, including former logging concessions, had been allocated for industrial tree plantations – almost all for pulpwood to feed the pulp and paper industry. However, only 67,448 hectares had been planted. 133,000 hectares had already been allocated to pulpwood plantations, and a further 39,400 hectares to transmigration (resettlement) schemes (*FWI/GFW, 2002*).

Since then, deforestation in Aceh has reached 270,000 hectares per year, according to official estimates, further reducing the forest cover.² Illegal logging³ is particularly prevalent in the districts of Southeast Aceh, Singkil, South Aceh and Central Aceh – almost all areas of the Leuser Ecosystem – and on Simeuleu island, off Aceh's west coast.

Logs and processed wood are smuggled out of Aceh from locations on the west and east coasts to Malaysia, India and China. The Indonesian forestry NGO network, SKEPHI, estimates that state losses from illegal logging in Aceh amounted to Rp 36.7 trillion (US\$ 4.25 billion) between 1999 and 2004 (SKEPHI, 2004). Using official data, another NGO, WALHI (Friends of the Earth Indonesia), estimates that between 1996 and 2001 an average of 287,546.32 cubic metres of illegal logs were circulating in Aceh or were exported from Aceh each year. The figure for sawn and processed wood was 141,602.16 cubic metres (*Serambi, 7 October, 2003*).

Forest facts Aceh:

Total land area	5,671,700 ha
Forest Area (1989)	3,882,300 ha
-of which 'critical' [degraded](1989)	46,088 ha
Degraded forest (mid 1990s)	1,025,858
Forest cover (1997)	3,611,953 ha
Forest cover (2000)	2,753,000 ha
Forest areas released for transmigration sites (to 1998)	39,377 ha
Number of large concessions (1987)	20
Area covered by concessions (1987)	1,498,500
Area covered by concessions (1993)	2,202,900
Number of large concessions (2002)	9
Area covered by concessions (2002)	676,644
Deforestation rate	270,000 ha /year
Gunung Leuser Ecosystem	2,600,000 million ha (in N. Sumatra & Aceh)

² Hasjrul Junaid, Data deforestasi & Kerugian Negara akibat illegal logging di Propinsi NAD, SKEPHI, April 2004.

³ The use of this term is highly sensitive: it is used by the government to describe logging which is not legal according to Indonesian law. However, as the majority of forest lands have not been formally gazetted as required by Indonesian law, the legality of legal timber concessionaires – as defined by the government – is questionable.

For indigenous peoples, 'illegal logging' means any tree-felling on customary-held lands without the permission of the indigenous community. In any given area, this may include legal and/or illegal loggers as defined by the government.

Many NGOs prefer the term 'destructive logging' as this covers illegal and legal logging, both of which are damaging to the forests.

-Of which damaged	26%
Predicted damage due to Ladia Galaska road project by 2010	40%
Predicted losses in natural disasters by forest destruction not including the potential loss of life	US\$19.8bn

Source: Provincial Forest Economic Profiles, Ministry of Forestry & FAO, Jakarta Dec 1989; *Jakarta Post* 3/Dec/03; FWI/GFW *The State of the Forest, Indonesia*, 2002, MoF website tables at http://mofrinet.cbn.net.id/informasi/Statistik/Stat2002/Contents_02.htm

Box 2: Gunung Leuser and the Ladia Galaska Road project

The Leuser Ecosystem is a 2.6 million hectare area which spans southeastern Aceh and North Sumatra. It contains the 800,000 hectare Gunung Leuser National Park, which was declared a World Heritage Site in July 2004. It is one of the world's richest ecological areas and is estimated to provide ecological services worth around US\$200 million per year by protecting watersheds, providing clean water and freshwater fisheries. Leuser is the last refuge of Sumatran orang-utans, and one of the last for Sumatran tigers and the world's largest flower, the rafflesia.

A planned network of roads connecting the east coast to western Aceh will cut straight through the Leuser Ecosystem, opening up the forest to loggers and dramatically increasing the risk of fatal floods and landslides. The 1,587 km road project, called Ladia Galaska, was initiated by Aceh's governor, Abdullah Puteh and supported by Soenarno, the Minister of Regional Infrastructure Development,⁴ who claim that it will foster development for poverty-stricken Aceh, as well as the security forces. It is opposed by the forestry and environment ministers in Jakarta as well as the Leuser Management Unit (LMU), the EU-funded conservation body that manages the area and an NGO Alliance, spearheaded by SKEPHI. The EU has spent 31 million euros (39.4 million dollars) on Leuser since 1996 (*EU Business* 17 February 2004).

Construction of Ladia Galaska started in 2001, before the legally required environmental impact assessment (EIA) was approved. This was eventually submitted in 2003. But a legal challenge mounted by NGOs, which highlighted this fact, was thrown out in mid-2004. In early July, the Banda Aceh District Court dismissed a lawsuit brought by WALHI against the Aceh governor and other officials. WALHI argued that the government had violated the 1997 environment law by permitting work on Ladia Galaska to start before the EIA approval. The case was dismissed on the grounds that the project had not officially started until 2003. The judges also said that witnesses had produced no hard evidence of WALHI's claim that Ladia Galaska would damage the protected forests. WALHI said it would appeal against the ruling (*DTE* 62).

A vigorous international campaign is underway to stop the project. NGOs suspect the main reason for the road scheme is to give city-based entrepreneurs access to commercially valuable timber and open up more areas for plantations. Money and patronage are the issues, rather than development. NGOs say the regional government has not accounted for US\$2.7 million in road project funds and have called on the president to hold the governor to account for the fatal floods in early 2004.⁵ (*Tempo*, August 24-30, 2004; *NGO Alliance* May, 2004) A press release by LMU and the NGO Alliance Against the Ladia Galaska Road Network predicts that if the road project continues at least 5,000 lives will be lost over the next ten years. Forest damage caused by the road is predicted at 400 – 2,400 hectares per kilometre of road (*Jakarta Post*, 9 March, 2004).

⁴ He is suspected by SKEPHI campaigners to be the main illegal fundraiser for the PDI-P, the political party of former President Megawati Sukarnoputri.

⁵ *Tempo* Magazine, August 24 -30, 2004; NGO Alliance Against the Construction of Ladia Galaska Road, Open letter, 13 May 2004.

Military and police-backed illegal logging has been rampant within the Gunung Leuser National Park for several years. Lobbying by Leuser conservationists resulted in a 2001 Presidential decree (Inpres 5/2001⁶) which aimed at stemming the destruction, but this did nothing to help. By 2002, 26% of the Park had been destroyed, according to LMU director, Alibasyah Amin (*Jakarta Post*, 1 September, 2004). A survey by LMU in 2000 estimated that Ladia Galaska would increase the amount of affected forest to 40% of the Leuser Ecosystem by 2010 and would risk losses of Rp 168.7 trillion (US\$19.8 billion) in predicted natural disasters caused by the forest destruction, not including the potential loss of life (*Jakarta Post*, 3 December, 2003).

Who is responsible for the destruction?

The timber barons

As elsewhere in Indonesia, powerful timber companies have controlled and degraded large swathes of forest land in Aceh. At the height of the Suharto-era logging boom, concessions covered well over two million hectares (*FWI/GFW 2002*),⁷ or just under 40% of the total land area. Across Indonesia, concessions covering thousands of hectares were handed out to political and military cronies of previous President Suharto from the 1970s, when new laws were passed to step up natural resource extraction by big business. Logging concessionaires took over the forests of indigenous peoples, whose ancestral customary rights were ignored. Indigenous communities across the Indonesian archipelago have been impoverished and marginalised by this wholesale, decades-long theft of resources.

Industrial logging has exacted a heavy toll on Indonesia's forests. The concessionaires ignored selective logging regulations and trashed the forests both within and outside their allotted areas, leaving the degraded areas vulnerable to forest fires. The destruction meant that in three decades as much as half the forests were destroyed. Official estimates by the state environment office in 2004, put degraded forest land at least 57 million hectares, within a total of 120.35 million hectares of land classified as state forests (*Jakarta Post*, 22 April, 2004). However, this estimate is likely to be out of date and over-optimistic, with the real extent of forest loss far greater. Within the next ten years, according to a recent prediction from Yale University, there may be no intact lowland forest left at all (*Sidney Morning Herald*, 28 August, 2004).

As the prospect of almost total forest wipe-out looms, WALHI is repeating its call for a nationwide moratorium on industrial logging until a fully sustainable forest policy, which respects the rights of indigenous communities, is adopted by the government.

Since the downfall of Suharto in 1998, the big timber barons have been joined by local entrepreneurs, enjoying new powers under Indonesia's decentralisation programme. This programme, implemented in 2001, was supposed to ensure that resource-rich regions enjoyed a greater share of revenues from forestry, mining, gas and oil and other sectors. However, it also had the effect of putting pressure on regional governments to raise income from natural resources in their areas. Many small-scale logging concessions were issued by regional governments under the new decentralised powers. In some areas this led to a chaotic situation where small-scale concessions overlapped with the larger Suharto-era concessions, further complicated by an increase in local community demands for restoration of rights to forest resources and an increase in illegal logging.

In Aceh, 17 of 19 large logging concessions were listed as still operational in 1998 (*DTE 47*). But the worsening security situation and conflicts over forest resources between loggers and local indigenous communities made conditions extremely tricky for these companies. There were several cases in which local communities burned down company base camps when companies failed to respond to demands or acted against communities trying to reclaim land.

⁶ This Presidential Instruction was aimed at tackling illegal logging especially in Tanjung Puting National Park in Central Kalimantan and the Leuser Ecosystem in Aceh/North Sumatra – see http://www.dephut.go.id/INFORMASI/Inpres/5_01.pdf

⁷ The exact figure is 2,202,900 hectares in 1993, from an Indonesia-wide total of 61,736,536 ha.

In March 2001, governor Abdullah Puteh issued a logging moratorium for the big timber companies, but this was aimed not so much at preventing further destruction, as negotiating extensions to their contracts. Companies felling forests for plantations and other non-forests were permitted to continue, despite a national ban on the conversion of natural forests imposed in 2000 (*Serambi*, 7 October, 2003).

By 2002, official data listed only 9 logging concessionaires as active in Aceh, covering a total of 676,644 hectares in the region. In terms of area, this still made Aceh the 7th biggest logging province in Indonesia, following Papua, East, South and Central Kalimantan, Maluku, Central Sulawesi and Riau.⁸ In contrast, the logging industry association, APHI, listed 14 companies in Aceh in 2002, although it did not clarify which of these were still active – see table.

Logging concessionaires in Aceh		
Note: the following information is from the website of the Association of Indonesian Concession Holders (APHI), which was last updated in 2002.		
Name of company / HPH (Group)	AREA(Ha)	Notes
PT. Aceh Inti Timber Co. Ltd	125,900	Logging camp reportedly burned by local people during land conflict
PT. Aceh Prima Plywood Industry	66,000	
PT. Alas Helau Aceh (Kalimanis)	152,000	Company linked to Kertas Kraft Aceh pulp plant. Group controlled by Bob Hasan, former Suharto crony and cabinet minister, sentenced to 6 years for corruption. Logging camp reportedly burned by local people.
PT. Alasaceh Perkasa Timber (Mujur Timber)	56,500	
PT. RGM Lestari d/h Bayben W.(Raja Garuda Mas)	146,500	Raja Garuda Mas is one Indonesia's biggest pulp and paper groups – is alleged to be involved in illegal logging and land disputes.
PT. Gunung Raya Utama Timber Ind. Aceh(Mujur Timber)	118,000	
PT. Hargas Industries Indonesia	85,000	

⁸ Data from Indonesian Ministry of Forestry website, 2004, <http://mofrinet.cbn.net.id/informasi/Statistik/Stat2002/BPK/I1102.pdf>

PT. Kruing Sakti (K.L.I)	115,000	
PT. Lamuri Timber	53,000	
PT. Overseas Lumber Indonesia (Raja Garuda Mas)	109,000	See note above on Raja Garuda Mas
PT. Tjipta Rimba Djaja	85,000	
PT. Trijamas Karya Inti	41,000	
PT. Wajar Corpora	48,600	
PT. Wiralanao Ltd.	55,925	

Source: <http://www.aphi-pusat.com/members/hph-aceh.htm>; (notes by DTE; source *Serambi*, 7 October, 2003 and others).

Military and police

The high levels of Indonesian military (TNI) and police personnel in Aceh are closely linked to the destruction of the forests.

In 2003, after declaring martial law in Aceh, Indonesia launched its biggest military operation since the invasion of East Timor in 1975. Forty thousand TNI troops and police were reported to be involved in the new effort to crush opposition to Indonesia's rule (*AFP*, November, 2003). Amongst the other horrific impacts of this war, NGOs predicted that martial law would lead to more deforestation.

Activists believe that the war against GAM is, in fact, a convenient cover for stepping up the plunder of Aceh's natural resources and that the conflict will be perpetuated as long as there are profits to be had. The military has little interest in peace because this will diminish their role and reduce their business opportunities.

The military, police and local politicians are all involved in forest-destroying business activities in Aceh. The security forces have access to trucks, fuel and transport that civilians don't. TNI units supplement their income both through backing and protecting illegal logging enterprises and levying fees on timber trucks using the forest roads and public highways.

Sometimes the security forces involved in illegal logging are in competition: conflicts over control of timber access routes have led to armed clashes between military and police, both of whom are beyond the control of the civilian government.

This kind of corruption does not stop at timber-felling. According to SKEPHI, logged-over areas are appropriated for oil palm plantations by the local political elite or converted to farmland by people including retired police and army personnel.

Law enforcement is at worst non-existent and at best extremely ineffective. In early 2004, for example, SKEPHI reported that the head of Southeast Aceh's district assembly and timber baron H. Umuruddin Deski was detained and investigated by the martial law authorities. Shortly after, he was reported to be operating again freely after bribing his way out of custody.⁹

The impacts: tragedy, poverty, more destruction

Floods hit four districts in southeastern Aceh on 7-8 May, 2004. One person died, four houses were swept away and thousands were forced to leave their homes. Heavy rains had caused three main rivers in the region to overflow. WALHI Aceh pointed out that roads in the Ladia Galaska network cut across these watersheds and repeated warnings that more disasters would follow if the government insisted on pushing ahead with the project.

⁹ SKEPHI open letter to Indonesian police chief Da'i Bachtiar, 14 April 2004; press briefing 2/Apr/04.

The 2004 flood is the latest incident in a long history of fatal floods, attributed to forest destruction. After the Suharto era forest carve-up, rapacious logging led to conflicts with local communities and serious environmental problems. Local flooding and landslides claimed a number of lives during the 1980s. In 1990, a series of major floods hit south and southwest Aceh, destroying crops, sweeping away homes and belongings. Thousands of people whose rice-fields had been destroyed, were threatened with food shortages in an area traditionally known for producing a surplus of rice. Illegal logging was identified as the problem with companies, local military, police and government officials all blaming each other. But action was taken only against local people. Aceh government data at the time indicated that 10 logging concession holders were logging around 600,000 hectares of forest in South and West Aceh alone, where already 60% of the forest resources had already been exploited (DTE 47).

In December 2002, the death toll from floods on the west coast was thirteen. Since then floods have affected most districts in Aceh, the worst cases in southwest Aceh where homes and farmland have been lost as well as lives.¹⁰

The combined effects of natural resource destruction and the bloody conflict and entrenched corruption, mean that much of Aceh's population, despite living in a resource-rich region, remain impoverished. According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the poverty rate in Aceh doubled from 14.7% in 1999 to 29.8% in 2002.¹¹ This was the highest poverty rate in Sumatra. According to local government data, 53 percent of families in Aceh live in poverty (*Serambi*, 30 September, 2004).

Indigenous communities, whose cultural identity as well as livelihoods are bound up with the forests, have suffered dislocation and marginalisation as a result of forest loss by outside forces. Indigenous systems of natural resource management include ways of regulating forest use (for medicines, honey, rattan, resins, game and other products as well as timber) which avoid over-exploitation and which accommodate the forests' protective functions – preventing soil erosion and regulating water flow. These systems have been severely undermined by large-scale logging by concessionaires and illegal logging – to the extent that communities sometimes have no option but to join in the logging.

An example of this process is documented in John McCarthy's 2001 study of 'wild' logging and the Kluet community in Menggamat, South Aceh, near the Gunung Leuser National Park. Here, the indigenous community lost control over their customary forests when logging gangs backed by powerful district-level networks moved into their customary area. The situation led indigenous leaders to attempt to ensure the community benefited from illegal logging by imposing taxes on logging, rather than lose out completely. A community-based forest management initiative by the international conservation NGO, WWF, failed because it ran up against this powerful logging network.

"The most significant problem was that key officials and even some village heads supported the logging while the Bupati [district head] valued its contribution to regional budgets....Furthermore, many villagers had become economically dependent on logging, and the rapidly shifting economic forces continued to drive local villagers to mine forest resources. In the short term at least, the proposed conservation regime could not guarantee village livelihoods and therefore struggled to get off the ground."¹²

The role of civil society

The people most directly affected by forest destruction are those who live in or near forest areas affected by flooding and landslides. They include indigenous communities trying to

¹⁰ Final Defence Statement by Bestari Raden's Legal Team – Pledoi Tim Advokasi Masyarakat Sipil Aceh "Tasmaya" September, 2004.

¹¹ *Indonesia Human Development Report 2004, The Economics of Democracy*, UNDP, 2004.

¹² John F. McCarthy, *'Wild logging': the Rise and Fall of Logging Networks and Biodiversity Conservation Projects on Sumatra's Rainforest Frontier*, CIFOR Occasional Paper No. 31, October 2000.

defend their ancestral customary rights against the loggers, plantation developers and armed extortionists who have invaded their lands.

The resignation of President Suharto in 1998 and the period of optimism and reform that followed, opened political space for civil society to demand democracy, an end to tyranny by the security forces and a change towards pro-poor policies. In 1999, a national-level indigenous movement, the Alliance of Indigenous Peoples of the Archipelago (AMAN) was founded. Among its demands were the recognition of indigenous rights and the return of customary-owned natural resources to indigenous control. Important gains were made in indigenous rights and natural resource management. A Constitutional Amendment was passed in 2000 which recognised and respected the rights of 'adat [customary] law communities'. In 2001, Indonesia's highest legislative body, the People's Consultative Assembly, passed a decree which paved the way for reform of all sectoral laws in line with new principles of natural resource management, including the recognition and respect for 'adat [customary] law communities'. However, these gains have not yet been implemented in the forests of Kalimantan, Papua, Aceh or elsewhere.

Community action

Local communities' reactions to the more flexible post-Suharto political climate tended to be directly concerned with immediate issues. In South Aceh, a new organisation called Rimueng Lam Keulut threatened to set fire to logging concessionaire's base camps in the district unless the forestry minister withdrew the licences of all nine timber operations. The threat was partially successful in that it led to negotiations between company, local people, 29 village heads and forestry officials and a temporary halt to logging by two companies. One of these companies was PT Medan Remaja Timber, whose concession was cancelled only after local people had burned down a building at its base camp. In 2004, a leading member of the indigenous rights and environmental movement in Aceh and founder of Rimueng Lam Keulut, Bestari Raden was arrested on suspicion of orchestrating the burning (see Box 3).

Another figure in the struggle against destructive logging is Jailani Hasan, an indigenous leader from North Aceh, who is also a member of AMAN's council. Jailani, as profiled in the Indonesian newspaper, *Kompas*, is customary leader of around 40,000 people in seven villages, who follow traditional systems of natural resource management, resource rights and dispute resolution. Under customary law, for example, the use of poison and explosives for catching fish is forbidden as it damages the environment and harms others people's interests: the traditional method of river fishing is using fish traps and nets. People caught using the outlawed methods are fined millions of Rupiah. Disputes are settled and fines set by the indigenous leader, religious elders and the community.

Jailani and his group, together with local NGOs and community groups, have succeeded in getting 21 logging concessionaires suspended by the central government, including a company owned by the man who was once Indonesia's most powerful timber baron - Bob Hasan. This has been achieved in the face of terror, intimidation and violence by employees of the targeted companies. Jailani's goal is to achieve recognition for indigenous claims over the forest and to protect the ecosystem. "Entrepreneurs, investors and rich people can stay in hotels when there's a flood, but the ordinary people drown", says Jailani. The ongoing conflict and security situation makes it difficult for Jailani to meet and consult the indigenous communities to consolidate their work (*Kompas 27 September, 2004*).

NGOs

Many of Aceh's NGOs have struggled to stay in existence during the years of conflict. Under pressure from the security forces and already severely restricted in their movements and in the scope of their activities, NGOs faced a deteriorating security climate following the declaration of martial law in 2003. Since martial law was replaced by the civilian emergency status in May 2004, it has become easier for some civil society organisations to operate, although there remain serious constraints on people wishing to move around inside Aceh.

WALHI Aceh is an environmental NGO that has maintained a voice throughout the conflict, speaking out against forest destruction, illegal logging and corruption. WALHI Aceh is part of the NGO campaign to stop the Ladia Galaska Road project and has also been involved in

advocacy to bring US-based oil multinational, Exxon Mobil, to account for human rights violations around its Aceh gas installations. Director Muhammad Ibrahim told the *Jakarta Post* that it has been possible to continue working in Aceh, where other organisations have been forced to suspend operations, because WALHI deals with environmental issues. Still, the risks remain high: after joining the campaign against Ladia Galaska, Muhammad Ibrahim was targeted. "Some local figures sent a letter to the governor, asking him to take stern measures against WALHI and if he (the governor) failed to do so, they would take the law into their own hands", said Ibrahim. Now he regularly receives threats through phone calls and letters (*The Jakarta Post*, 23 April, 2004).

Unfortunately, this kind of intimidation happens frequently and there are cases which show that such threats can be in earnest. On January 31, 2000, Sukardi, a volunteer with the Bamboo Thicket Institute (Yayasan Rumpun Bambu Indonesia), a local environmental and human rights group based in Aceh, 'disappeared'. His bullet-riddled corpse was found on February 1.¹³ An Amnesty International document stated:

"It is not known who is responsible for his death or why he was killed. There are unconfirmed reports that a witness heard the sounds of someone apparently experiencing severe pain coming from Sawang police station on the evening of Sukardi's "disappearance". (*Amnesty International Appeal*, 22 February, 2000)

In January 2001, a mass grave containing 14 bodies was uncovered in Terbangsan, Kluet Selatan in South Aceh. One of the bodies was identified as that of a researcher from the Centre for International Forestry Research (CIFOR) in Bogor, West Java. Three young researchers from CIFOR and a member of the Gunung Leuser National Park staff had disappeared over a year previously in September 1999 (*DTE 48*).

An interview conducted by an Australian academic in February 2000 gives a first-hand impression of how activists who try to prevent forest destruction are at risk:

"I worked for the Leuser Project...the one funded by the European money...Myself and a friend, [name withheld] who also worked with Leuser told them it was the local police and military doing the logging. I know this is a fact because my own brother was paid by the military to help clean the trees once cut. He was paid Rp 25,000 a day by a local commander. That's a lot of money, but the work was hot and had to be done quickly...My friend – the one who worked with me – has disappeared. I don't know where he is. The people in the office [Leuser] say he has probably gone back to his village, or gone to Jakarta or Medan to earn money. I don't think so – I think he has been arrested. One day last year, we found some military giving orders to a group of workers about cutting trees. I was afraid and told my friend to come away, but he wouldn't. He had an argument with the military, and told them they shouldn't be cutting the logs. They were very angry. It was about two months after that he disappeared.

...Look [shows a long scar], I got this one day when I tried to stop a member of the military catching birds. I cry when I see the birds in the nets, some die. The military officer picked up a rough stick and beat me with it. (Interview, February, 2000).

Box 3: Bestari Raden: forest activist on trial

The case of Bestari Raden, indigenous activist and former council member of the indigenous peoples alliance, AMAN, is a telling illustration of how forests, corruption and conflict politics are interlinked in Aceh.

Bestari Raden's trial opened in Tapak Tuan, South Aceh in June 2004. Bestari was arrested by military personnel from Southeast Aceh district command in March 2004. He was charged with rebellion against the state and incitement to violence. The trial was put on hold during the

¹³ Human Rights Watch, World Report 2000, Indonesia: Defending human rights, <http://www.hrw.org/wr2k1/asia/indonesia2.html>

second round of the presidential elections in September, with the verdict finally announced in early October 2004: Bestari Raden, who was found not guilty of rebellion, but guilty of threatening state security and incitement, was sentenced to two years and six months imprisonment (*Defence Team press release, 2 October, 2004*).

He was in Aceh as part of a government team assigned to review sections of the environmentally damaging Ladia Galaska road project (see box 1). The fact that Bestari was on state business and that the team's composition and mission had been approved by the security minister and the military authorities in Aceh did not protect him.

Bestari's arrest prompted an international campaign protesting against his treatment and calling for a fair trial.

Bestari's detention is believed to be connected to his campaign against deforestation in Aceh and the Ladia Galaska road project. The final defence statement by Bestari's legal team describes how he was originally a sports teacher who became a coach at district and provincial levels and accompanied teams to national events. He also helped set up a cultural group, Rimueng Lam Keulut, which promoted traditional ritual arts. When serious flooding affected Kluet district, PT Medan Remaja Timber, a logging concessionaire, was believed to have been directly responsible for a school being washed away. Bestari Raden and his colleagues in Rimueng Lam Keulut lobbied local and national level authorities to have the company's permit withdrawn. Lack of progress in negotiations led the community to take matters into their own hands and burn down a building at the company's base camp. The forestry minister withdrew the company's logging permit in 1999.

Bestari is a well-known figure and his campaigns against forest destruction directly oppose the business interests of the military and police in Aceh. The security forces use Aceh's forests for income-generation and it is an open secret that military and police personnel are protectors of illegal loggers and timber concessionaires. The arrest may well contain a personal element, too, since the police officer who requested his arrest was deputy chief of South Aceh in 1999, the time when the logging base-camp was attacked. The incitement to violence charge relates to this incident, although Bestari was not in Aceh at the time. The same police officer was in charge when Bestari was arrested and badly mistreated on a previous occasion.

Bestari has been victimised in the past for his attempt to protect the forests and local people's livelihoods. As well as being beaten up in police custody, his home has been ransacked and set on fire. His defence lawyers say that the intimidation was probably linked to the forest guards' loss of illegal income once PT MRT's operations were stopped. Bestari was also sacked from the civil service and, shortly afterwards, put on the official wanted list by the South Aceh police who claimed he was the local GAM commander for Tapak Tuan.

Contact dtecampaign@gn.apc.org for more information about this case and the international letter-writing campaign responding to Bestari Raden's arrest and imprisonment.

No easy answer

Since resource destruction in Aceh is closely bound up both with the conflict and with Indonesia's general approach to natural resource use, it is difficult to imagine a strategy that is capable of reducing deforestation that does not involve conflict resolution in Aceh as well as fundamental change in forest policy in Jakarta.

There is no piecemeal solution to the problems in Aceh. Those interested in preventing forest destruction and loss of biodiversity should also support peaceful initiatives to bring an end to the war in Aceh.

A negotiated peace and military withdrawal from Aceh would create better conditions for stopping the destruction of Aceh's forests. It would need to be underpinned by policy change which restores rights over the forests to those communities who have most interest in sustaining them – a move that is urgently needed throughout Indonesia as well as in Aceh. In the immediate term, the Ladia Galaska road project should be halted and alternative ways of

developing Aceh's infrastructure properly considered. An Indonesia-wide moratorium on industrial logging, combined with better law enforcement and measures to tackle corruption, would help save the forests in Aceh.

The need for action is extremely urgent – to save lives in the short, medium and long term: to prevent more conflict casualties, to stop more deaths from floods and to maintain the natural resources which will sustain the lives of future generations of Acehnese.

Recommendations:

To the Indonesian government:

- End the military approach in Aceh – restart negotiations to end the war in Aceh.
- Impose a logging moratorium on industrial operations in natural forests;
- Halt the Ladia Galaska road project and start inclusive consultations on alternative ways of developing Aceh's infrastructure.
- Shut down corrupt and unsustainable timber industries.
- Recognise and act on the need for wider reforms which recognise indigenous rights in forest areas.
- Direct funds towards reforestation/agroforestry schemes under community management.

To the international lending community:

- Support peaceful initiatives to bring an end to the war in Aceh.
- Support initiatives to bring about fundamental forest policy change – which shifts the current system from unsustainable exploitation towards sustainable use of resources and which recognises the customary rights of indigenous forest-dwelling communities.
- Support efforts which foster community forest management.
- Stop promoting exports of oil palm, wood products and minerals as a means of solving Indonesia's economic problems and open talks on debt cancellation instead.
- Support campaigns to prevent destructive logging (whether these are termed illegal or legal), to tackle corruption and to bring those responsible for orchestrating forest destruction to justice.

(A fuller list of recommendations on forestry is in DTE's Special Report on forests: Forests People & Rights, June 2002, page 57 <http://dte.gn.apc.org/camp.htm#for>).

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DTE – International Campaign for Ecological Justice in Indonesia

Down to Earth is a small UK-based non-government organisation (NGO). We monitor and campaign on the social implications of environmental issues in Indonesia. We aim to support civil society groups and provide an international voice at the levels of national governments, foreign companies, aid agencies and international financial institutions. Our main focus is the rights of the rural poor and indigenous peoples to sustainable livelihoods and to determine their own futures. For more information see our dual language website at <http://dte.gn.apc.org/> or contact dte@gn.apc.org.

