DEFORESTATION

Forest clearing blamed on local govt

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Local government officials may have accepted bribes from logging, mining and plantation companies in exchange for permission to clear forests, a top official has said.

The Forestry Ministry's director general of forestry business development, Iman Santoso, said bad governance had undermined efforts to halt Indonesia's deforestation.

"It's possible it happens with bribery and permits, because as we know, if there is mismanagement in our natural forest it must be from be bad governance," said Iman.

Experts have also acknowledged the problems of bad governance.

Earlier last year, the London School of Economics and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology released a study titled "The Political Economy of Deforestation in the Forests" which linked increased illegal logging with heightened tension in the run-up to local elections.

The results were obtained from satellite images, which tracked annual changes in forest cover from 2001 to 2008 and showed that local politicians had used money obtained from companies to fund their campaigns.

Indonesian and European Union Forest Law Enforcement official Andy Roby said local officials could issue temporary licenses, which meant companies could clear land without proper environmental impact assessments and without the ministry finding out until the forest had been cleared.

"The Forest Ministry in Jakarta is continuously in a tense relationship with the local government and there's a sense that industry here has lost control of what's going on in the forest," he said.

"The ministry can't stop forest clearance and conversion," he said.

Iman said that tackling illegal logging was difficult as it was under the authority of local government.

"We in the central government only receive information from the concession holders and also local observers, and then we go to the field and see what's happening and make the necessary legal enforcement," he said.

Forest clearing has led to land disputes in many regions of Indonesia, most recently in Bima, Mesuji and Riau where violent clashes took place between locals, companies and police.

Earlier this month, police fired rubber bullets into a crowd of protesters in Riau, who claimed that palm oil company PT Mazuma Agro Indonesia (MAI) had taken their land.

The North Sumatra government issued a permit to MAI to develop a 5,800 hectare site, in which the community of Batang Kumuh lives.

A court ruled in favor of Batang Kumuh last year, but MAI appealed to the Supreme Court and continued to work on the land.

This situation is common in Indonesia as many communities inhabit land without titles. Companies can apply for permits to develop their land from local governments without the communities' knowledge.

However, Iman said he had been in discussion with the local government of Riau, with the latter agreeing that it did not want to disturb the investment climate in Indonesia while resolving the issue.

He also said that not all of the protesters needed the land, but rather some were part of a political movement aimed at land reform.

Andy said there were two ways the central government could tackle the problem. First, by better regulation of local government and improved transparency, and second, by stopping exports of products without an environmental impact assessment, as was now done in the timber industry.

"I think regents need to be held more accountable for what goes on (and) the central government should do more," he said.



JP/R. Berto Wedhatama

Harvest: Workers gather oil palm seeds at a plantation in Lampung. The Forestry Ministry has alleged that forest clearing for oil palm plantations has been conducted by companies operating without licences or with licences obtained through corrupt means.