
Indonesia: Togean people defend their forests, lands, and ocean

On September 15, more than 500 people from several neighbouring communities set fire to logging equipment owned by the timber company Argo Nusa, a subsidiary of the timber conglomerate Jayanti Group, owned by Bob Hasan, one of Soeharto's cronies currently facing corruption charges.

These ethnic Togeans from Bungayo (a series of villages on the island of Talatakoh) descended on the logging camp, demanding the company stop operations and leave the island immediately. Enraged over the exploitation of their lands, they burned two logging trucks and a bulldozer. Community members later assembled outside local parliament, demanding an explanation for the government's misappropriation of their traditional lands and forests. The local authorities arrested six youth. Failing to receive an answer, the villagers converged on the police station, prepared to force the release of the arrested youth. Following the company's departure from the Island on September 17, police freed the six in custody; however, the affected communities are still awaiting compensation.

On September 18, the Alliance of Indigenous Togean Peoples and the Togean Women's Solidarity held demonstrations in the Kayome Forest, in the island of Batudako. For generations the Bobongko people have relied on the forest, taking only what they needed for food and housing. They are opposed to any project that would create plantations or otherwise destroy the forest of which they are a part.

In 1998, a letter from the Governor of Central Sulawesi gave permission to Cahaya Flora Perkasa Kencana (CFPK), a logging syndicate from Kalimantan, to operate in the island. Failing to consult with village elders, the company manipulated an "approval" to its activity. The policy of the district and provincial governments and the Forestry Department, together with the destructive nature of large-scale forestry companies, is depriving the Bobongko of their traditional lands.

To lobby for reparations and stop the destruction of their forest, the people of Batudako have been forced to resort to desperate measures. On September 18, a large group gathered at the logging camp and seized two bulldozers, a large generator and a television set.

People from nearby islands have also come to the Kayome forest, and solidarity among the indigenous community to drive corporations from their homes has increased. Several hundred people, representing four different ethnic groups (the Bobongko, Togean, Saluan and Bajau Indigenous people) and Solidaritas Perempuan Togean got together at Kayome.

The rights of the Togean People are rapidly being undermined by the actions of investors and large companies operating on the Islands. The threat of exploitation from international companies is very real. Two large pearl harvesting industries, Tamatsu and Cahaya Cemerlang, based in Japan and Australia respectively, have set up operations in the Islands and foreign tour operators have claimed large tracts of the coastal area. These cases of foreign exploitation are adding fuel to the battle to reestablish some form of local self-determination over the resources. An increasing number of people are realizing that this is just another form of colonialism, as the one imposed by the Dutch more than

half a century ago.

There is a strong resolve to act and a conference scheduled for November will attempt to address issues surrounding Togean Indigenous Peoples. The Congress will bring together the four ethnic groups in the archipelago, looking at ways of effecting their access and rights to the ocean and land based resources. It is hoped that this will again put increased pressure on political elements and force out those who would otherwise exploit their land.