
Mining activities destroy the environment in Indonesia

Freeport, a huge US-based mining company that operates in Indonesia, owns the Grasberg gold mine in Irian Jaya, the biggest open-pit gold mine in the world. This mine is producing a significantly negative environmental impact both on the water courses and on the forests of Irian Jaya. Ajkwa River -into which Freeport dumps 125,000 tons of rock waste every day- was considered by the provincial environmental bureau in April 1997 as not filling the required public health standards because of contamination from mining waste. Already in 1996 very high levels of contamination by mercury had been found according to an independent analysis performed by PT Sucofindo. Cyanide and arsenic contamination is also likely to exist.

Meanwhile, Jim Bob Moffet, spokesman of the company, has recently admitted the existence of another source of pollution, this affecting the forests nearby: large quantities of copper are contaminating the massive tailings deposition area in the rainforest downstream from the mine. The dumped tailings have changed the course of the Ajkwa, which has been forced to sheet eastward into the forest. Freeport has already drowned 50 km² of the river's catchment and this "sacrifice zone" will grow to 130 km² of rainforest, during the estimated 40-year life of the mine. The company is trying to "compensate" local communities for the damages it is causing by paying them an annual one percent of future profits. Local people have refused to accept such offer since it would mean to buy their silence. They just want to ensure that the problems caused by the mine are adequately addressed. In 1996 the affected communities took their grievance outside their nation's borders, to the home of the company itself, by filing a US\$ 6 billion lawsuit in a Louisiana Federal Court. Freeport is also involved in cases of violence against the peasants. Last August four Ekari people died around the mine and the police obliged Ekari villagers to hand over all sharp objects, including those used for agriculture, hunting and religious ceremonies. The WRM Secretariat addressed letters of concern to the company's and the country's authorities because of this event.

Source: World Rivers Review. October 1997.