
Indonesia: Pulp mill impacts on health of local population

It has been 63 years after Soekarno-Hatta proclaimed the independence of the Indonesia Republic on August 17, 1945. Every August especially on the 17th, Indonesians all along the archipelago celebrate this nation's anniversary.

Sadly, for people of Siantar Utara, in the Municipality of Toba Samosir, Siruar region, North Sumatra, it will be somehow impossible to have such a celebration. Almost all of the around 300 families here suffer skin disease which is quite itching and painful. This skin disease is suspectedly caused by the waste of the pulp mill Perseroan Terbatas Toba Pulp Lestari (PT TPL).

Just recently, people of Siruar came to dialogue with PT TPL; they came with their children who suffer suppurating skin disease all along their body especially most at their hips.

With tears flowing down their eyes, Rev. Sumurung Samosir and his wife Indira Simbolon witnessed the pain of these sisters and brothers of Siruar. Dimpos Manalu, a social worker as well as a young intellectual here in North Sumatra who is engaged and works together with marginal people in the region was deeply sad. The three of them couldn't say a word in front of the suffering of these people. There are babies with suppurating lumps on their head; a middle-aged woman said that all the women in Siruar have painful eczema but they are too ashamed to show it up. Suddenly, in response to this statement another woman came up saying that her husband also suffers itching skin disease mainly at his hip and genitals.

Indira Simbolon could take a picture of a woman who badly suffers painful itching skin disease all along her body: she has lumps in her thigh, hip, bottom, belly, chest, and back. Many men said too they had painful itching lumps on their hips and genitals.

It came as an ironical fact indeed that just a few days ago the Minister of Environment awarded a green-award to PT TPL which means that the company has been managed in an environmentally friendly way.

PT TPL representative Leo Hutabarat told me that the itching skin disease of the people of Siruar has nothing to do with the company. Isn't it weird that PT TPL did not bring a doctor to help the people of Siruar? Doesn't this mean that they admitted what they try to deny? Since the beginning, PT TPL has not been consistent. In every dialogue where many people were involved they have talked politely but in practice they are arrogant. They keep a distance from the people around. Some journalists and I could see that: we were standing close to the river bank where the company's waste is poured. An employee of PT TPL accompanied us and told us how inconsistent the company has been. They throw their waste early in the morning often when it is raining. They manage to make things neat when they know that guests --especially from Jakarta-- are going to come. They did their best so that the smell caused by the PT TPL is not so bad. They bring doctors just when people around are angry with the unbearable situation, especially the impacts on health.

The water in the river where PT TPL throw their waste is brown-dirty while at the other part relatively

far away from this company, it looks clean. The staff of PT TPL who came to talk with us said: " Many fishes near PT TPL can suddenly die". "I have been a farmer for a long time," said another person from Siruar, " but I never saw banana die before producing fruit." He pointed out to a banana which was almost dying: "Look at those bananas. Their leaves are wilted while they are still young."

People are powerless, and who cares? Those who work at the health office are also civil servants and they do not report what is going on with the impacts of PT TPL on the people's health condition. How come they keep silent?

PT TPL's huge profits have been at the expense of the people.

Some important concrete actions should be implemented to tackle this problem: the government should form an independent team to research the skin disease of the people of Siruar while PT TPL should acknowledge that their waste processing is not according to a proper environmental conduct; maybe PT TPL should stop their operations. The suffering of the people of Siruar is a human tragedy that we all need to pay attention and to take action; we all who side with them should take action and give them support.

By Gurgur Manurung, Environment scholar, doctoral student at Jogjakarta National University, UNJ.
E-mail: gurgurmanurung@yahoo.com (This piece has been translated from Indonesian into English by Limantina Sihaloho).