
Indonesia: students break up meeting to promote transmigration and oil palm plantations in the Mentawai islands

For perhaps the first time since Indonesia's independence, the West Sumatran authorities called together 120 Mentawai people for negotiations with the local government in Padang. The representatives were community leaders, religious figures and village heads from the whole Mentawai island chain (off the West coast of Sumatra.)

The subject of the meeting was how to bring 10,800 transmigrant families to the Mentawai islands for a commercial oil palm development (PIR-Trans) by PT Citra Mandiri Widya Nusa -owned by ex-Employment Minister Abdul Latif.

The thirty or so students from the Mentawais who attended managed however to break up the meeting. The students said that if their demands had not been met that day, the entire school and university student population of Padang would have come and forced the meeting to be dispersed. The chronology of the events was as follows:

On December 8th at around 10.30 am local time, some thirty demonstrators (Mentawai young people and students who jointly formed the Mentawai Reform Movement GERAM) held a protest outside the building in Padang which was the venue for a 'consultation meeting' organised by the provincial Transmigration & Forest Resettlement Department, local government officials and about 120 community representatives and village heads from all the Mentawai islands.

The meeting was opened at 8.30am by head of the West Sumatra transmigration office, Dr. Ngumar Prayitno. Speakers on the platform were then to give the following presentations:

- The head of the West Sumatra Transmigration Department: "The Transmigration Programme in the Mentawai islands during the current Five Year Plan";
- The head of the West Sumatra Forestry & Agriculture Department: "Forestry Development in the Mentawai islands";
- Local (district) government official: "Development of the Mentawai islands in this Era of Reform";
- Yuhirman from SPKM (an NGO selected to speak for the Mentawai people by the provincial Transmigration Department head): "Integration and cultural assimilation";
- Suhaimi, an investor from PT Citra Mandiri Widya Nusa: "The development of oil palm plantations on the island of Siberut".

When it was the turn of the speaker from SPKM, the demonstrators shouted that he should step down and that the meeting should be closed. His speech and that of the company representative were drowned out by the microphones of the demonstrators outside, so the meeting was stopped temporarily.

The students then entered the building and spoke directly to the audience. They said that transmigration was not needed in the Mentawai islands. The many transmigration schemes which had been tried had created many problems and the condition of the surrounding communities was a

cause of concern. The government used the Transmigration Programme as a Trojan horse, as means to exploit natural resources in the Mentawais, especially timber. Government officials, in this case from the Transmigration Department, were cooperating with logging concessionaires and timber companies to prepare sites and generating all kinds of problems in the process.

The GERAM demonstrators pointed out that it was clear that PT Citra Mandiri Widya Nusa had been invited to speak at this 'consultation meeting' because the oil palm plantation company was going to take on transmigrants in Siberut, even though the indigenous community had rejected these plans. The Minister of Forestry and Agriculture had already issued an official letter (No 850/Menhutbun -VI/1998) which recommended that the planned plantation was located elsewhere. The demonstrators threatened to continue their speeches and to bring more protestors along unless the meeting was closed.

Some of the Mentawai representatives went outside to try to pacify the demonstrators and invited them to discuss matters with the government officials. The members of GERAM completely refused to enter the meeting room and said they would not stop their protest until the Transmigration Department came to talk with them outside and declared the 'consultation' officially closed. The rest of the Mentawai participants started to drift outside to the demonstrators. The government officials suggested the protestors joined the discussion inside, but they refused.

The protestors also demanded that the company representative spoke to them outside. When he did, the demonstrators bombarded him with questions and gave him a copy of the Minister's letter. In his response, Mr Suhaimi said he would convey their rejection of its plan to the head of the company. The demonstrators replied they didn't want to know about the head of the company.

The demonstrators then read a statement to the government officials who had come outside. The main points were that:

- The Mentawai islands should become an official district as soon as possible so they were no longer administered as part of the mainland;
- They refuse to be part of any Transmigration Programme schemes until the Mentawai islands were given district status;
- The Transmigration Department must immediately rectify the problems on existing transmigration sites in the Mentawai islands;
- The authorities should immediately withdraw all operating permits from PT Maharani Puri Citra Lestari, PT Citra Mandiri Widya Nusa and PT Sagu Siberut Perkasa, as these companies have caused conflict and damaged the cultural and natural environment of the island of Siberut.
- All the Mentawai village heads and community representatives should be careful not to be deceived or misled by the pretext of development for the Mentawais at the expense of the indigenous community.

The head of Transmigration for West Sumatra, Dr Ngumar Prayitno Winota said that he understood the demonstrators' position. Transmigration policy in the current era of reform had changed because the local community had input into every scheme. He declared the meeting officially closed and said that the presence of the company was outside his department's authority. The demonstrators accepted his statement and dispersed straight away.

The meeting was initially planned to take 2 days.

* Note

Government plans to open up the Mentawai islands for massive oil palm plantations using transmigrant labour have been around since the early 1990s. The most recent version was in late 1996, when the Governor of West Sumatra approved plans for a 70,000 ha oil palm plantation in the buffer zone of Siberut National Park. Protests by Indonesian and international groups have persuaded Ministers in Jakarta to block these developments so far. Now, as Indonesia struggles to solve its economic crisis by increasing exports, large-scale oil palm schemes are scheduled for many forest areas of the outer islands and the ban on the export of raw logs has been lifted.

Source: Translation by Liz Chidley from news received from Indonesia.