
Indonesia: Indigenous Peoples oppose acacia plantations on their customary lands

The indigenous people of Teluk Meranti in the Kampar Peninsula, Riau, Sumatra, are resisting efforts by a pulp and paper company to take over their customary lands.

The pulpwood plantation company, Riau Andalan Pulp and Paper, (RAPP) owned by the pulp and paper giant, APRIL, has obtained in principle permits to develop Acacia plantations on 45,000 hectares of peat swamp forest in the Kampar Peninsula, Riau Province, Sumatra. RAPP would like to establish up to 150,000 hectares of Acacia plantations in a ring around the edge of the 700,000 Kampar Peninsula on peat forests that are under the traditional management and ownership of about ten indigenous communities.

RAPP's permits cover peat forests that are the customary lands of the indigenous community of Teluk Meranti. If the acacia plantations are developed on their lands, the Teluk Meranti community will lose an essential source of livelihood, as it manages and uses the area for fish, shrimp, small game, building materials and non timber forest products. RAPP plans to start clearing the forests this year.

In June, the community of Teluk Meranti sent a letter to the company RAPP/APRIL declaring that they reject the presence of the company on their lands. They did so "with regard to the following considerations:

1. The land is to be retained for our grandchildren's future
2. Experiences by other surrounding villages and areas where the RAPP company has operated have impacted negatively on the local community's rights
3. It has caused loss of agricultural and horticultural land belonging to the community
4. The community will lose the source of its livelihood (economic, social and cultural) from the forest which will be converted to an industrial timber plantation."

This community has the right to this land because as they specified in their letter: "We, the community of Teluk Meranti, have inhabited and utilised this area in a wise and traditional way since long before Indonesia's independence".

The letter, signed by 82 community members, had the intention specified by the community "that unwanted problems will be avoided in the future". Copies of the letter were sent to the most important authorities of the country including the Ministry of Forests and different Commissions of the House of Representatives.

Scale Up, a local organization that is now assisting the community to prepare a map of their customary territory, was recently requested by community leaders to contact national and international groups and ask for their support in their struggle to stop their peat forests being destroyed by RAPP.

As a result, on August 17, 26 organizations from Asia, Europe, and the Americas sent a joint letter to the company, urging it to respect the community's decision of rejecting the presence of the company in their lands. In the letter, they reminded the company that "the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, includes the right of indigenous peoples to reject planned developments that would affect their customary lands". Copies of this letter were sent to the community, the authorities, the press and the customers of RAPP.

We hope that the Indonesian authorities will take action to ensure that the rights of the indigenous people of Teluk Meranti are respected and that they will intervene to stop the planned acacia plantations on their lands.

Article based on information sent by Patrick Anderson. Please contact WRM for his email address.