Indonesia: Mounting opposition to mining in protected areas

The "Coalition to oppose mining in Indonesia's protected areas" has issued a media release to expose how mining activities are encountering strong and mounting opposition at various levels. The Coalition is composed of the following ten groups: JATAM; WALHI-Friends of the Earth; Indonesian Center for Environment Law; WWF Indonesia; Kehati; PELANGI; Forest Watch Indonesia; MPI; POKJA PSDA; PELA.

Reactions at open pit mining in protected forests have been coming from civil society in Sumatra, Kalimantan, Java, Sumbawa Besar (south-east Indonesia), Sulawesi. These include letters of protest, postcards, demonstrations, declarations and statements by provincial governments, students, academics, indigenous peoples, ordinary Indonesians and by the international community.

It seems that public perception is that things have gone too far with mining activities. That's how the Canadian mining company Placer Dome's plans to mine for gold in the protected forests of South Kalimantan's Meratus Mountains --home of the Dayak peoples and the orangutans-- have sparked a passionately worded letter of protest by Indigenous Dayak representatives, a demonstration in the South Kalimantan provincial capital on the 1st of July demanding government action to reject Placer Dome's lobbying and a declaration of the Provincial Government calling on the Indonesian national parliament not to permit mining in the Meratus protected forest. It's high time, since 44% of Dayaks' forests have been degraded in just 12 years!

In Palu, capital of central Sulawesi island, sustained community opposition have included protests directly against Rio Tinto and Newcrest's plans to build a gold mine in the Poboya Protected Forest Park. Actions have yielded statements by both the provincial House of Representatives (2 July 2003) and by Prof Aminuddin Ponulele, Governor of Central Sulawesi, that they will refuse any central government attempts to permit the mine to go ahead. The threat posed by heavy metals, dust and other mine wastes to the Poboya Protected Forest Park and the water supply for 200,000 residents of Palu is too great a risk according to Governor Aminuddin, who was quoted by local paper Radar Palu on 3 July 2003 requesting Rio Tinto / Newcrest's joint venture company PT Citra Palu Minerals to leave Central Sulawesi province.

Even the usually apolitical UNESCO Asia Pacific office in Jakarta (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation) have appealed to Indonesian parliamentary committees currently considering government plans to mine in protected areas. They sent a letter with specific reference to tiny Gag island in West Papua where BHP Billiton plans to build the biggest nickel mine in the world and dump mine waste into the sea. An IUCN / UNESCO International Workshop held in Hanoi in February 2002 had chosen the Raja Ampat archipelago including Gag Island as one of seven sites to consider for World Heritage listing from a field of 25 potential sites in Southeast Asia for its high biodiversity: 505 species of coral --which is an extraordinary 64% of all known coral species in the world--, 1,065 fish species --amongst the highest fish diversity in the world. UNESCO's intervention is a blow to BHP Billiton's lobbying to overturn protected forest status and the company's plan to use STD - Submarine (ocean) Tailings (waste) Disposal, despite it's claims to have reformed after the Papua New Guinea Ok Tedi disaster. BHP's Ok Tedi mine in Papua New Guinea caused

severe, long-lasting pollution of the Fly River, and local communities successfully sued BHP for multi-millions of dollars in damages.

The international community has also reacted. Over 1,100 letters have been sent by individuals and organisations in 43 countries addressed to Indonesian President Megawati and including testimonials such as this from Beth Partin, who heard of US mining company Newmont's push to expand into Indonesia's protected forests: "I live near Denver, Colorado where Newmont is based. In Colorado, we live every day with the damage caused by mining, for example, the Alamosa River was poisoned more than a decade ago by a cyanide leak and after years of cleanup is only beginning to show signs of life."

To date around 6,000 sets of three postcards, one addressed to the House of Representatives, another to the Forestry Department and the third one to the Minister for Mineral Energy and Resources have been signed and sent by ordinary Indonesians as an expression of support for existing environment protections against mining. Student environmentalists have staged protests at the Australian Embassy in anger at Australian and other foreign government lobbying on behalf of mining companies. Protests have also been held at the House of Representatives and the Forestry Department, with more planned. Heads of forestry education at five prestigious universities: Bogor Institute of Agriculture, Gajah Mada University, Mulawarman University, Hasanuddin University and Lampung University Groups, have issued a declaration of opposition to mining in protected areas on 3 July 2003. Students and academics highlighted the total economic contribution made by sustainable forestry and environment protection, which according to Indonesia's national budget, outweighs that of mining, with much more potential untapped.

Article based on information from: "Indonesia regional govts, civil society: More speak out for forest protection from mining", 13 July 2003, statement by Coalition to oppose mining in Indonesia's protected areas, e-mail: inform@mpi.org.au , sent by Mauricio F. Ferrari, Forest Peoples Programme, e-mail: mfferrari@pd.jaring.my , http://www.forestpeoples.gn.apc.org/