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## Indonesia: Reopening of Indorayon pulp mill encounters strong local opposition

The reopening of the PT Inti Indorayon Utama paper and rayon pulp mill, in Porsea, North Sumatra, has caused strong local opposition to resume. The factory is located at the centre of a densely populated district near to Lake Toba, one of the largest fresh water reservoirs in South East Asia, and releases pollutants, often unfiltered, into the environment, pollutes the water and air in the region and destroys the local Batak population's basis for life. During the 1990s, scientific evidence demonstrated that the mill was responsible for the damage caused to the health of the local population: skin diseases, respiratory illnesses and damage to the nervous system are consequences of the production of pulp and rayon. Furthermore, land clearing, essential for production, has had a devastating impact on local farming: landslides, uncontrollable fluctuations in the water supply, damage to plants and fish. Local people have been opposing for a long time the mill and the plantations that feed it (see WRM Bulletin 14).

Indonesian churches and NGOs which have joined the protest against the reopening of the factory are supported by the United Evangelical Mission (UEM). In a letter to the Indonesian President Megawati Sukarnoputri, the UEM, together with Misereor, the Diaconical Work of the Evangelical Church in Germany, Watch Indonesia! and INFID, appeals to the Indonesian government to refrain from reopening the mill, to avoid risks to the population and the environment.

Although environmentalists and the then Indonesian Minister for the Environment had already warned of the foreseeable consequences from the outset, the project was implemented under the patronage of former ruler Suharto. After the downfall of Suharto, and as a result of the massive protests by the people, production was temporarily stopped, but since then the company has been fighting incessantly for production to be resumed --as it turns out, successfully. Although the Indonesian Minister for the Environment had recommended the final closure of the plant at the beginning of 2000, the government gave the company management permission to resume operations in November 2002. Since then, there have been recurring violent clashes between the local population and the police, leaving eighteen demonstrators imprisoned, among them two pastors from the Batak Protestant Christian Church (HKBP), one of the UEM's member churches.

Local NGO KSPPM and the North Sumatra branch of environmental group WALHI are also supporting the protestors. Local groups set up a crisis centre and kitchen in the neighbouring town of Tarutung to help victims of the conflict. A Porsea man in hiding in Jakarta said: "The government does not care about the environment --about the damage Indorayon has caused-- or about what the local people want. The government takes the company's side, but 90% of the community don't want Indorayon here."

Article based on information from: "UEM against the reopening of pulp mill in Indonesia. Indorayon puts human life and environment at risk", Press Release, January 30, 2003, sent by Watch Indonesia!, e-mail: [watchindonesia@snaflu.de](mailto:watchindonesia@snaflu.de) ; "Thousands protest reopening of Indorayon pulp plant", Down to Earth, Newsletter No. 56, February 2003, e-mail: [dte@gn.apc.org](mailto:dte@gn.apc.org) ; <http://dte.gn.apc.org>

