East Asia: Ministerial Conference on illegal logging and trade

All participating countries of the Forest Law Enforcement and Governance (FLEG) East Asia Ministerial Conference held in Bali agreed to adopt a 13-point Ministerial Declaration, which will commit them to, among other things, taking immediate action against forest crimes. The three-day conference was attended by some 150 participants from at least 15 countries.

In the first point of the declaration the participants stressed that they would take immediate action to intensify national efforts and strengthen bilateral, regional and multilateral collaboration to address violations of forest law, in particular illegal logging, associated illegal trade and corruption.

The Indonesian Minister of Forestry M. Prakosa said, "We need to take strong measures against illegal logging. There is an indication that illegal logging goes hand-in-hand with illegal trade. As a consequence, combating domestic illegal logging and controlling illegal trade has to go together."

Several Indonesian NGOs that participated in the conference, and closely watched the declaration drafting process, praised the conference for being able to raise several important issues, such as widespread corruption among bureaucrats and the importance of respecting the indigenous and traditional local community's right over the forest. In this respect, Longgena Ginting of the Indonesian Forum for the Environment (Walhi) said that "such subjects were considered taboo before, but in this conference the participants discussed those issues in a frank and open manner. We appreciate this." Yet Ginting challenged the governments to immediately transform the declaration into concrete and solid programs.

The NGOs also expressed disappointment over the fact that not a single Malaysian state official attended the meeting, given that Malaysia has a big timber industry, which consumes a huge quantity of wood, legally and illegally felled from Indonesian forests.

Participating countries also committed to involve stakeholders, including local communities, in the decision-making process in the forestry sector, thereby promoting transparency, reducing the potential for corruption, ensuring greater equity and minimizing the undue influence of privileged groups.

Furthermore, existing domestic forest policy frameworks would be reviewed and appropriate policy reforms would be instituted, including those relating to granting and monitoring concessions, subsidies and excess processing capacity, to prevent illegal practices.

Longgena Ginting of Walhi urged the Indonesian government to immediately take strong measures against any illegal logging activities, including taking timber companies that used illegally felled wood to court. "And I also asked the government to start investigating thoroughly illegal logging activity at the Tanjung Putting National Park, Central Kalimantan, which was allegedly backed by Abdul Rasyid, a member of the People's Consultative Assembly," he said.