

Social-economic Rights

Government forced to take stronger action on forest fires

Friends of the Earth, 05-04-2017

WASHINGTON, D.C. — In a historic verdict in defense of forests and human rights, a court in Central Kalimantan has ordered the government of the Indonesian province to review the permits of palm oil companies associated with massive forest and peat land fires in 2015. The case against the government in Central Kalimantan was filed in 2016 by seven Indonesian citizens and supported by Friends of the Earth Indonesia (WALHI), following a 2-month mediation process. Among the evidence presented were findings previously presented in the report, 'Up in Smoke', published in 2015 by WALHI and Friends of the Earth member groups in the United States and Europe.

"While many of the world's largest palm oil producers have pledged to voluntarily address the massive environmental and human rights impacts of their business, it's clear that legal action is required to hold them accountable," said Jeff Conant, Senior International Forests Campaigner with Friends of the Earth United States. "This decision by the court in Central Kalimantan is a historic step in ensuring the government does what's needed to limit the damage from this sector."

Palm oil from Central Kalimantan is in thousands of consumer food products and cosmetics on the global market, as well as in biofuels in many countries; numerous palm oil companies implicated in the decision receive financing from a broad range of banks and institutional investors in the U.S., including Goldman Sachs, JPMorganChase, Vanguard and the pension fund managers TIAA and CalPERS.

"This decision should also make it clear to the financiers of the sector that the risks of investment in palm oil continue unabated," Conant added.

The 2015 Indonesian forest fires lasted for months and caused massive air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions, at one point releasing more carbon dioxide than the entire United States economy, and causing an estimated 100,000 premature deaths in the

region. In 2016, four United Nations special rapporteurs sent a letter to the President of Indonesia urging his government to address the fire and haze crisis as an urgent matter of protection of human rights.

"This verdict is important not just to us, but to future generations," said Ari Rompas, Director of WALHI Central Kalimantan. "The judge recognized that the environment is a heritage to be preserved for future generations. It is therefore important that the government does not waste time in appealing this verdict, but ensures that companies respect the law and stop the forest fires."

WALHI analyzed satellite data of 181 palm oil company concessions from the 2015 fire season. The largest plantation land banks included in the study are owned by Wilmar International, Bumitama Gunajaya Agro (BGA), Sinar Mas, Best Agro International and Genting group. According to WALHI, the verdict means that these companies can now effectively be brought to justice.

"The judge made clear that the local government needs to ensure that companies stop the forest fires," Rompas continued "The companies need to allocate much more resources in order to prevent forest fires."

To date, the companies implicated in the verdict have not responded. The local government is now considering appealing the verdict. With a severe dry season predicted for 2017, it is imperative that the Indonesian government act quickly to adopt measures that enforce the court's decision.

In its ruling, the Court ordered the Central Government to:

- review and revise the permits of all plantation companies, whether implicated in the 2015 fires or not;
- actively enforce civil and criminal laws to penalize companies whose concessions were implicated in the 2015 fires;
- inform the public regarding the affected land and the companies that own concessions implicated in the fires.

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In addition, the central government of Indonesia is required to:

- form a Joint Team on Forest Fire Management consisting of the Ministry of Environment and Forestry, the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Health;
- build a Respiratory Medicine hospital and an evacuation room for people affected by forest fires.

Khalisah Khalid, Head of Campaign and Network Development at WALHI, said, "The victory of this citizen's lawsuit in Central Kalimantan, and previously in Riau Province, build momentum for the government to protect human rights, especially of vulnerable groups such as children, whose health is threatened by haze pollution from forest fires. The UN Human Rights Council should continue to remind the government of Indonesia to hold corporate actors accountable for their role in the fires."

Palm oil's environmental footprint was also raised in a European Parliament vote this week that called for a phase-out of palm oil as a component of biofuels by 2020.

Labor union condemns alleged shooting on Freeport workers

The Jakarta Post, 24-04-2017

Andi Gani Nena Wea, president of the Indonesian Workers Union Confederation (KSPSI), lamented the actions of police officers who allegedly fired shots at PT Freeport Indonesia workers during a rally in Timika, Papua.

Andri Santoso, Sakarias, Puguh Prihandono, Wibowo, Faisal and Zainal Abidin were reportedly injured during a protest in front of Timika District Court on Thursday, demanding the release of Sudiro, a colleague who is standing trial in an embezzlement case.

"Thousands of our workers called on the judge to suspend Sudiro's detention because of his [poor] health, but the judge denied [our demand]," Andi said.

The judge's decision to return Sudiro to his cell angered protesters, which led to a clash with police personnel, said Peter Selestinus, one of Sudiro's lawyers. "Someone threw

rocks at the feet of the Timika police chief, and officers responded by firing shots – they were aimed at protestors, not the air," he added.

Andi said he has been in direct communication with President Joko "Jokowi" Widodo to report on the incident and the actions of the Papua Police. KSPSI will stage a solidarity rally for the victims on Labor Day, or May Day, on May 1.



Dozens of workers of PT Freeport Indonesia stage a rally in front of the Energy and Mineral Resources Ministry office in Jakarta on March 7, 2017, demanding the government to resolve a dispute with the company so they can go back to work. (JP/Dhoni Setiawan)

Neither the Papua Police or the National Police have responded to queries related to the case. (dis/wit)

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‘I’ve never been normal again’: Indonesian women risk health to supply palm oil to the West

18-04-2017

Much of the palm oil used to keep our ice cream smooth, our chocolate shiny, and our margarine free of trans fats comes from the lush plantations of Indonesia and Malaysia. The big companies that produce the oil for food giants like Kellogg and Nestlé typically promise that it’s harvested in a way that protects both the environment and the workers.

Yet the women who work on the plantations here are suffering. Their complaints about health risks have gained such momentum that the palm oil industry group just created a task force to address concerns of female workers.

While men are often assigned the heavy jobs of harvesting the spiky bunches of oil palm fruits, women typically take charge of spraying young trees with a potent cocktail of pesticides, insecticides, and herbicides.

In the tropical heat, they trudge through the rows of palms carrying plastic tanks loaded with chemicals, including paraquat, an herbicide banned in much of Europe. Hour after hour, they spray the tree trunks, often with no protection beyond a piece of cloth tied over their nose and mouth. They’re typically expected to work through a quota of chemical tanks in order to earn their daily wage.

Veteran plantation workers — and the human rights organizations fighting on their behalf — say the women are exposed to severe health hazards from handling the chemicals. Work accidents can cause infections or blindness or blistering of the skin. Documented health effects of long-term exposure to paraquat also include Parkinson’s disease, lung damage, and kidney and heart failure.

“Sometimes if we give the grass pesticide, it goes right back to our face,” said Minah, a 40-year old worker at a palm oil plantation in Riau. She and other workers interviewed asked to be identified by pseudonyms because they fear retaliation.

Palm oil makes its way into many processed foods, from instant noodles to cookies, as well as toiletries, such as shampoo, toothpaste, and soap. It’s also a component of lipstick and biodiesel.

Many food companies that use palm oil — along with major Asian producers and distributors — are members of the Roundtable of Sustainable Palm Oil, or RSPO, an industry organization that strives to ensure the plantations don’t exploit workers or ravage the forests, in part by certifying that plantations comply with a set of standards. But the organization has a backlog of complaints, and activists say violations persist.

And while Unilever, Colgate-Palmolive, Johnson & Johnson, Proctor & Gamble, General Mills, PepsiCo, Kraft Heinz, Nestlé, Con Agra, and Kellogg have all issued statements committing to buy palm oil from sources that adhere to environmental standards and international human rights laws, many of them work through complex chains of traders and suppliers, making it tough to fully verify conditions on the ground in Asia.

“We recognize more can be done within our own supply chain to independently verify that the palm oil we use is both environmentally and socially sustainable,” Unilever said in a statement.

A spokesperson at Nestlé said that the company has been talking about labor concerns with Amnesty International and is “now developing a road map on labor rights in agricultural supply chains” that will include specific steps to ensure the company’s palm oil is harvested without exploitation.

Other companies that use Indonesian palm oil said they investigate any health or labor violations that come to light and demand corrective action.

But labor activists say too many companies blindly trust RSPO certification as a seal of approval, without doing their own research.

“Relying on RSPO alone is insufficient when it comes to labor issues,” said Seema Joshi, head of Amnesty International’s business and human rights team.

Even RSPO acknowledges that it has not solved the issues: “Our current guidelines are meant to provide adequate protection to workers,” said Stefano Savi, the group’s global

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outreach director. “This said, agriculture — including oil palm cultivation — and the regions where it is grown are challenging environments to secure the protection of human and labor rights.”

Amnesty International last year published a report documenting labor abuses on palm oil plantations owned by Asian agricultural giant Wilmar, headquartered in Singapore. The team also found strong evidence that women working in Indonesia’s palm oil plantations faced significant health risks.

“These issues that women are facing are systemic,” Joshi said. “It was shocking to me to see that the women who have the least secure work contracts are facing some of the most serious health risks because of the nature of work they’re doing on the plantations.”

The Indonesian nongovernmental organization Sawit Watch has uncovered similar stories. In 2015, Sawit Watch interviewed 22 female workers across three plantations. It found that workers who spent hours each day spraying fertilizers, pesticides, and herbicides suffered from respiratory and vision problems. Some said they did receive protective equipment, such as masks and gloves, but still came into direct contact with the chemicals and rarely, if ever, got checkups. Yet such women often have few other options.

Read the full story: <https://www.statnews.com/2017/04/18/palm-oil-chemical-illness/>

Political developments

Preliminary observations by Marcus Mietzner

Marcus Mietzner posted this on his Facebook page on the evening of April 19.

It may be too early to make academically sound statements about today’s election in Jakarta. The extent of Anies’ victory was unprecedented and – for most observers – unexpected. We need more data to understand why Ahok not only did not gain any additional votes in the second round, but in fact lost votes; and why there was such a large gap between last week’s surveys by the country’s most credible polling institutions (which predicted a tight race) and today’s result. However, some preliminary observations are possible.

The elections have shown that previously marginal Islamist groups can swing elections in Indonesia. It is important to note that Ahok’s loss is *not* a reflection of increasing religious conservatism among the broader population (indeed, a study of multi-year opinion poll data I have currently conducted with my colleague Burhanuddin Muhtadi shows that religious intolerance among Indonesian Muslims has declined between 2010 and 2016). Rather, the core of conservative and militant Muslims has grown better organized, funded and politically connected, increasing their capacity to mobilise at key junctures such as important elections. The issue of blasphemy – delivered to them by Ahok on a silver platter – allowed the Islamists to drive a successful campaign targeting more moderate Muslims. These moderate Muslims, who otherwise would not have paid attention to Ahok’s remarks, were successfully persuaded by a relentless grassroots, mosque-based and social media campaign that a) Ahok was unelectable, and b) anyone still voting for him was a bad Muslim. In February, 57 percent of Jakartan voters believed that Ahok was guilty of blasphemy – and indeed, 57 percent voted against him. 58 percent voted against him today. Further data analysis shows that the correlation between belief in Ahok’s guilt and a vote for or against him has been consistently in the 80 to 85 percent range. Taking further into account that Ahok’s approval rating as governor stood at around 70 percent throughout the campaign period, there is no doubt in my mind that the politicization of Ahok’s religion (wrapped in the blasphemy issue) was the single most important factor deciding this election. And this politicization was driven by the increasing capacity, mobilisation and outreach of Islamist groups, who formed an effective alliance with Ahok’s challengers.

While other campaign issues such as Ahok’s evictions of urban poor or the badly mismanaged reclamation project did not in themselves determine the outcome of the election, they contributed to Ahok’s predicament. Ahok’s brutal language and equally ruthless policy shortcuts alienated constituencies that under other circumstances could have been powerful allies in fending off attacks on his religion: poor kampung communities, human rights activists, environmentalists, social workers. Instead, these groups not only did not come to his defense when the blasphemy campaign started; in fact, some of them aligned with the Islamist gangs driving it. As Ian Wilson’s research has shown, groups such as FPI have systematically courted evictees and other victims of Ahok’s aggressive development and modernisation push, providing them with material support and giving them a voice in their conflict with Ahok. As a result, Ahok had much fewer defenders against trumped-up blasphemy charges than would have been the case

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had he built better relationships with socially underprivileged communities and their leaders and advisers. Arguably, then, the effectiveness of the blasphemy campaign against Ahok can be partly explained by his alienation of those actors who because of their traditionally moderate religious views would have been natural allies for a Chinese-Christian governor.

Today, the race to nominate the main challenger to Jokowi in 2019 has begun. The two leading contenders stood side by side this afternoon: Anies and Prabowo. But soon the tensions between them will be visible. Prabowo gave first indications of this in today's victory speech, in which he promised to ensure that Anies will serve out his full five-year term in Jakarta. In other words, he warned him not to try to run for president on his own. Presumably, Prabowo will attempt to contain possible ambitions from Anies' side by offering him the vice-presidential slot, but people who know Anies well say he is more likely to seek the presidency himself with an alternative coalition. Thus, it is not implausible that we could see a Prabowo-Anies-Jokowi race in 2019. But whoever will face Jokowi in a likely second round, the election is certain to be as deeply polarised as today's Jakarta ballot. Especially given the extent of Anies' victory, his campaign will be seen as the ideal blueprint for the 2019 challenge to Jokowi. There, the issues may not be blasphemy or even an invented Chinese father. Rather, the machinery of Islamist groups and its mainstream allies are likely to prop up their candidate by attacking Jokowi as a communist and protector of unbelievers – along the lines of the recent successful campaign against Rano Karno in Banten. There are interesting times ahead, and today's election was only the beginning of a much larger game at the national level.

After Big Win in Jakarta, Gerindra Targets 2019 Presidential Election

The Jakarta Globe, 23-04-2017

The Great Indonesia Movement Party, or Gerindra, the main backer of Anies Baswedan's run for governorship in Jakarta, is optimistic about its chances of winning the 2019 presidential election after quick count results pointed to a comprehensive win for Anies and running mate Sandiaga Uno.



Gerindra Party Chairman Prabowo, left, with Anies Baswedan and Sandiaga Uno at a press conference claiming victory in the Jakarta gubernatorial election on April 19. (Antara Photo/M. Agung Rajasa)

"Anies's win in Jakarta increases Gerindra's chance to win the next presidential election as well," Gerindra West Java Deputy Chairman Anggawira said on Sunday (23/04), as quoted by Beritasatu. According to a survey on approval ratings for political parties released on Friday by pollster PolMark Indonesia, Gerindra came second in political electability with 16.1 percent of the respondents saying they would vote for a Gerindra candidate in the 2019 presidential election. The ruling Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P) was slightly ahead in the poll with a rating of 16.9 percent.

Gerindra currently holds 73 out of 560 seats in the House of Representatives (DPR). Anggawira said the PolMark survey shows Gerindra has earned the trust of the public which the party will translate into real political support. Anggawira is confident Gerindra can double the number of its DPR seats after the 2019 general election. "The public has seen Gerindra's commitment to clean politics. There isn't even one member of parliament from Gerindra who is involved in a corruption case," Anggawira said.

Despite Anggawira's claim, records shows that Gerindra's Jakarta city councilor M. Sanusi was arrested by KPK, Indonesia's antigraft agency, after reportedly receiving a kickback from a property company in the controversial North Jakarta reclamation project.

See also: <http://jakartaglobe.id/news/ahoks-defeat-signifies-tough-road-ahead-democratic-tolerant-future/>