

Indonesia: environment threatened

After Brazil, Indonesia is home to the second largest rain forest left in the world today. The Indonesian rain forests are shrinking even faster than those of Brazil - the result of massive logging, mining and "development" megaprojects. In Indonesia, the environment and human rights are tied together inextricably.

Earth's second lung

Tropical rain forests provide much of the oxygen that lets the world breathe, as well as protecting fragile equatorial lands from erosion and desertification. They also provide a home for thousands of animal and plant species, many of them found nowhere else in the world. In the past 40 years, half of the planet's original rain forest has vanished.

Today, the forests of Indonesia are being felled at a frightening rate: 1.7 million hectares disappear each year from the 140-million hectare rain forest. According to the Asia Pacific Peoples Environment Network, 64 million hectares have been divided up among 543 forest concession holders, and another 43 million hectares are classified as critical land. Many of these concession holders are military officers, eager to cut and run.

Logging means big profits, both for the logging companies and the government. Government forestry royalties are expected to triple over the next five years. Forest products are Indonesia's second-largest source of foreign exchange after oil and gas. Indonesia is the world's largest

wood exporter, supplying 70 per cent of the world's plywood and 40 per cent of its tropical hardwood.

In West Papua (Irian Jaya), lowland eucalyptus and mangrove forests are especially threatened by development of pulp and paper operations and shrimp farms. The Asmat river estuary is in danger of falling into the sea.

Indonesia has environmental regulations in place, many of them developed with Canadian aid. But these rules are often flouted by companies or military officers who choose to ignore them, and government officials often look the other way. The Bintuni Bay nature reserve in West Papua, for instance, has been invaded by forestry companies who log the area and export wood chips to Japan. Even the Indonesian Forestry department's own figures show that only 13.6 per cent of forest concession holders are logging in accordance with selective cutting regulations; the other 86.4 per cent broke the laws in 1992-93.

"It's not a secret that timber companies tend to be deceitful," admitted State Minister for Forests Djamaloedin Soeryohadikoesoemo.

Deforestation in Indonesia is a problem for the whole region. Indiscriminate logging has contributed to massive forest fires on the Indonesian islands of Sumatra and Kalimantan. The smoke from these fires is trapped near the ground by the smog of industrial by-products and car exhaust fumes, casting a haze over the whole region.

Mines, dams, pollution and other disasters

The rain forests are also threatened by large-scale mining, particularly in West Papua. Underground profits have been plentiful in Indonesia since Freeport opened the world's largest mine in Tembagapura, West Papua, to mine for copper.

One of the biggest beneficiaries of mining in Indonesia has been a Canadian-based company, Inco Ltd. Inco opened an open-pit nickel mine in Soroako, Sulawesi - once pristine rain forest - in 1968. The Canadian government's Export Development Corporation kicked in \$57.25 million in loan guarantees to get the Soroako mine up and running, with further assistance provided by the governments of Britain, the United

States, Australia, Norway and Japan. According to Minewatch, the main reason Inco shifted production from Canada to the Third World was because of the Ontario government's scrutiny of its pollution, and increasing criticism of its long history of appalling treatment of workers.



Inco's smelter emissions over the Sulawesi rain forest are up to four times the generous level permitted by the Indonesian government. The use of outmoded emission control technology and cheap labour has helped PT Inco Indonesia produce huge amounts of nickel cheaply. The profits have gone to company stockholders in Toronto, with the people of Soroako stripped of their fields, and their environment devastated. Inco's subsidiary, Ingold, is exploring for copper and gold in West Papua, threatening another mining disaster.

Over 100 Canadian junior mining companies have followed the lead of Calgary-based Bre-X and Indochina Goldfields (controlled by Vancouver stock promoter Robert Friedland) on a gold rush into the rain forests of Kalimantan. Other Canadian companies are also involved in the hunt for minerals and for "black gold" - oil.

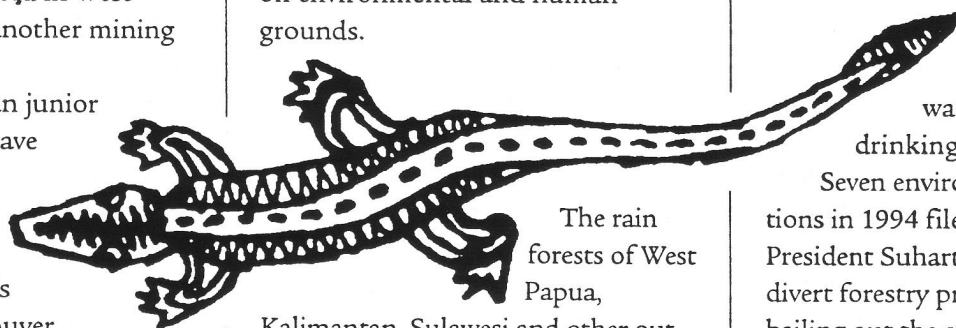
Indonesia's top-down development strategy has led to environmentally-destructive megaprojects like the Kedung Ombo dam in Central Java, which has flooded the lands of 25,000 farmers. The World Bank paid 74 per cent of the costs of the dam.

On the "Team Canada" trade mission to Indonesia, Prime Minister Jean Chrétien tried to flog a Candu nuclear reactor, despite local environmental groups' protests. The reactor would be on a fault line, jeopardizing the lives of millions. A Candu in the hands of the Indonesian military is especially worrying, since India used Candu reactor technology to explode a nuclear bomb in 1974.

"Land for the people"

In many cases, it is the indigenous peoples of Indonesia who have suffered the most from destruction of their forest homes, megaprojects and the incursion of tourism. Indonesia has tried to address the population problems of its inner islands - Java and Bali - by forcing thousands of families to transmigrate to sparsely-populated outer islands.

The program makes sense on paper, but it is wildly inappropriate on environmental and human grounds.



The rain forests of West Papua,

Kalimantan, Sulawesi and other outlying islands are not suited to the intensive paddy agriculture of Java, but have been farmed sustainably by shifting cultivation by the indigenous peoples of the outer islands. Transmigrants with no alternative available use their old methods in the rain forest. This has destroyed the viability of the soil and peoples have quickly been left destitute, with no help from the central government. The culture of the "backwards" indigenous people, meanwhile, is also being destroyed by this displacement.

Despite these failures, Indonesia is still pushing ahead with transmigration. Over two million people have been resettled so far, with many more due to be moved. The World Bank and Canadian funds are among those used to pay for transmigration programs.

Indonesia's environmental movement growing

Indonesians have not stood by silently while their environment is

destroyed around them. A number of environmental organizations have sprung up around the country, most of them working closely with groups fighting for human rights. Despite attempts by the government to crack down (such as a ban imposed on the publication of a calendar entitled "Land for the People"), environmental activism is strong. In one case, five hundred villagers marched on an industrial estate in northern Sumatra that houses six companies

whose industrial waste has contaminated their water, now unsafe for drinking or bathing.

Seven environmental organizations in 1994 filed a lawsuit against President Suharto for his decision to divert forestry protection funds to bailing out the state-owned aircraft manufacturer. Other groups are fighting to preserve forests, win fair compensation for displaced farmers, stop golf courses from destroying farmland and forests, keep Indonesia nuclear-free, and for virtually all other aspects of ecological protection.

This pressure works. Scott Paper was forced to cancel a scheme to clear 900,000 hectares in West Papua to make room for a eucalyptus plantation after lobbying by groups inside and outside Indonesia, who threatened a boycott of Scott products.

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