

Ravages of Mining Too High a Price for Economic Development, Activists Say

by Fidelis E. Satriastanti, The Jakarta Globe, July 9, 2009

An activist on Wednesday harshly criticized mining as a tool for (economic development, saying it should be the last option (explored due to the social, economic and environmental upheaval (it caused. "There is no such thing as sustainable mining. It's a myth — (there is nothing about mining that is sustainable," said Siti (Maimunah, the national coordinator of the Mining Advocacy (Network, an NGO.

"Whatever it is that's being mined is a nonrenewable resource (and when it dries up, there is nothing left except the misery of (people who were evicted from land then rendered useless," she (said.

Referring to mining activities at Batugosok, West Manggarai (district, on the island of Flores, Siti said small islands (should not allow mining because of their geographic (vulnerability.

"Mining eats up large expanses of land, requires huge quantities (of water — an important issue in areas already experiencing (water shortages — and uses environmentally dangerous chemicals (which pollute the air and water," she said. "The local people (will also be faced with social issues such as conflicts (resulting from an influx of immigrants, price increases, (prostitution and health problems."

Since June, local residents and environmentalists have been (protesting the activities of a gold mine seven kilometers from (Labuhan Bajo, the capital of West Manggarai district, which (serves as the gateway to the famous Komodo National Park.

Siti said it was not the mine's proximity to the national park (that had sparked the protests but the high-risk nature of such (activities for small islands.

"It takes at least 105 liters of water to clean just one gram of (gold, so you can imagine the effects in areas that are already (having trouble with water," she said.

She added that other locations such as Central Kalimantan, Buyat (Island in South Sumatra and Papua also were struggling with (similar problems.

Environmental expert Emil Salim noted that industrial mining was (a major source of tax revenue but questioned how that money was (being spent.

"These companies do pay taxes, but the next question should be, (are some of those funds being returned to these poor areas to (eradicate poverty or are they just being used to build another (tall city building," he said.

Emil said local governments must play a role in trying to (alleviate the unwelcome effects of mining on local communities. (He said they needed to attract or develop substitute industries (to replace mining once the mines ceased to be productive.

"[Local governments] need to introduce renewable industries — (such as agriculture, fisheries or plantations — and urge the (companies to rehabilitate the mining sites if they are no longer (productive," he said.

Emil added that he had asked the Ministry of Energy and Mineral (Resources to investigate the case on Flores Island.

"Another problem is that mining is usually located in isolated (areas and the use of advanced technology produces a strong (cultural contrast with the poor rural or traditional people (usually found in these areas," he said.

Mining expert Ryad Chairil said the central government often (failed to consider the complexities of the problems created by (mining in local communities.

"The central government holds a very important role in these (matters because while mining, especially gold mining, is a (strategic and vital product for this country, there are many (consequences that need attention, such as the widespread (environmental damage caused by chemicals used in gold mining," (he said.

Ryad said that ultimately the problem was that economic interests always trumped ecological concerns.