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Indonesia battles illegal timber trade

Police blame politicians for collusion in trade.

By Simon Montlake | *Special to The Christian Science Monitor*

JAKARTA, INDONESIA — The disposition of three Chinese-owned ships carrying illegally cut timber has become a test case of Indonesia's ability to pull together national and local law-enforcement agencies in Indonesia's effort to crack down on the logging industry. The ships, loaded with 885,500 cubic feet of raw logs valued at about \$3 million, was seized off the coast of Borneo in November. They are being held in Jakarta's Tanjung Priok port.

Illegal timber accounts for 65 percent of Indonesia's log production. At the current rate of deforestation, the lowland tropical forests in Kalimantan — the Indonesian part of Borneo Island that supplied the logs to the Chinese ships — will be gone by 2010.

Forestry officials in Jakarta say they recognize the scale of the problem and want to act, but are frequently blocked by provincial officials who collude with illegal loggers and profit from the trade.

Since the fall of President Suharto in 1998, his centralized, military-backed regime has given way to looser political ties between Jakarta and the provinces, sparking a feeding frenzy in resource-rich areas.

"Instead of one Suharto, you now have 300 Suhartos, and all they know is how to rape and pillage the forests," says Timothy Nolan, director of a European Union-funded bureau that supports sustainable forestry in Indonesia.

One such area is Tanjung Puting, a 988,000-acre conservation park in Kalimantan that is home to one of Indonesia's last surviving orangutan colonies. Widespread logging and forest fires have damaged 40 percent of the park. **Telapak, an environmental group, estimates that 10.5 million cubic feet of illegal logs are stolen annually from Tanjung Puting.**

Officials suspect the logs aboard the Chinese ships belong to companies linked to timber baron Abdul Rasyid, who was elected to Indonesia's supreme parliament in 1999. Activists and forestry officials allege that Mr. Rasyid and his family oversee the felling of trees in Tanjung Puting that are either processed locally or exported as raw logs.

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The seizure of the ships marks a victory in the effort to crack down, but it has not been without setbacks. Last year, acting on a tipoff from forestry officials, local police seized a shipment of illegal logs from the park.

But it was a short-lived success.

“Unfortunately, after being detained for one or two weeks, they were released [by police],” says Wahyudi Wardoyo, secretary-general to the minister of forestry. The logging resumed.

But this time, ministry officials enlisted Indonesia’s Navy. The Navy then intercepted the three Chinese ships, which had just loaded cargoes in Pankalanbun, the port for Tanjung Puting.

The Navy impounded the vessels in Jakarta along with their illegal logs, far from the timber bosses.

National police were then brought in to investigate the exporters who supplied the logs.

“They’re being smart about it,” says Julian Newman of Environmental Investigation Agency, a UK-based campaign group that works with Telapak. “But the less progressive elements in the government and the local barons don’t like it. It’s become a symbolic battle.”

The Chinese ambassador in Jakarta has complained to the Indonesian government about the detention of the state-owned vessels and 75 crew members, whom the Navy won’t allow to leave the ship.

Indonesia’s ambassador in Beijing has also been asked to explain the seizure. Yang Peidong, a Chinese Embassy official in Jakarta, says the ships had the necessary documents for their cargo and shouldn’t be punished for carrying the timber. “They came here under contract,” he says.

Ironically, China has imposed a strict ban on logging at home after years of rampant clearcutting.

Environmentalists say that has helped stoke demand for wood across Southeast Asia, in Indonesia, Cambodia, Burma, and Laos. Feeble laws and porous borders have led to a boom in illegal timber trade across the region.

In Indonesia, simply keeping hold of the seized timber is a struggle. Local politicians have pressured Jakarta to return the Chinese ships to Kalimantan.

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Timber companies want the case to be handled locally, where their grip is solid, instead of in Jakarta.

But forestry officials insist that, since the logs were seized offshore, it falls under the central government's jurisdiction.

Earlier this month, the national equivalent of the FBI announced that it would auction off the timber in Jakarta. Only a firm response from the Navy and Forestry Minister Muhammad Prakosa, who is said to have won the backing of President Megawati, blocked the release of the logs.

But bringing illegal loggers to justice still depends on the country's graft-ridden police and judiciary.

"In this case, the Ministry of Forestry seems quite determined to win the tussle with the illegal loggers. If they do, it will be encouraging progress. If they don't, it's back to business as usual," says Diarmid O'Sullivan, an analyst for International Crisis Group, a think-tank based in Brussels.

Campaigners don't expect to see Rasyid behind bars — if the timber is proven to be his — but say the seizure has definitely hit the illegal loggers where it hurts: in the pocket.

Zhao Yue Shueng, a lawyer from Shanghai, China, who is trying to win the release of his client's vessel, MV Fonwa Star, estimates that the cost of lost business for the ship-owners is \$4.5 million.

"Until now, we've not seen any documents saying why our vessels are arrested," he complains.

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