

RELATION BETWEEN LOGGING AND CONFLICT IN ACEH
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Until a peace agreement was signed on 15 August 2005, the Indonesian province of Aceh was the site of a low-intensity insurgency by guerrillas from the Free Aceh Movement, known as GAM, against the Indonesian government. It has also been the site of massive logging, legal and illegal, given that almost 70 per cent of the province's 5.6 million hectares is forested. (The province is home to the Gunung Leuser ecosystem, renowned for its ecological richness, and the Leuser National Park that was declared a World Heritage site in 2004.) It is difficult to make the argument that competition over forest resources fuelled the conflict or is inhibiting the peace, but there have been various ways in which the fate of Aceh's forests has been tied to the conflict since it erupted in 1976.

How were logging and conflict related before the 2005 peace agreement?

1. In a general sense, grievances over resource extraction have been a factor in the resentment against the central government in both Aceh and Papua, the two areas of separatist violence at either end of the Indonesian archipelago. The right to control those resources has been a demand of the independence movement in both places – one reason the ability to retain revenue from logging was a critical part of autonomy packages passed by the Indonesian parliament in 2001.
2. Large numbers of troops in Aceh and an insufficient budget to support them led the Indonesian military to seek economic opportunities while stationed in Aceh, and one of the most lucrative was logging. Many Indonesian NGOs voiced suspicions from 1998 onwards that members of the local military had a vested interest in prolonging the conflict so that they could profit economically, but the allegations are difficult to prove. Police and local civilian officials also profited from illegal logging, with some of the most egregious practices in Southeast Aceh (Aceh Tenggara) and Simeulue.
3. Because of GAM's control of interior upland areas in Aceh, particularly in the period 1998-2002, it derived significant income from either taxing logging operations or more rarely, active involvement in illegal logging on the part of some GAM members themselves.
4. Security concerns and the need to move troops into the interior to pursue the guerrillas were used as pretexts to build roads through the rainforest, and when roads are built, timber has to be cut on either side – and individual officers and officials often benefit from the sale. The best known example of this is the Ladia Galaska project, a network of roads slicing through the Gunung Leuser ecosystem and justified publicly on the grounds of local development and reducing the isolation of poor communities.

5. In Aceh Tenggara, local NGOs allege that illegal logging increased after martial law was imposed in May 2003, through collusion of security forces and local officials, at a time when movement and freedom of the press were both tightly controlled. Of 17 sawmills operating illegally in Aceh Tenggara, at least two were run by TNI officers and 6 by either the district government or members of the district council.¹ In Simeulue in October 2004, the army seized 18,000 cubic meters of illegal logs – but then some of the logs reappeared several months later in Banda Aceh in the hands of a company called PT Kuala Batee, complete with the letter declaring them legal. They had clearly been sold.² Logging companies there reportedly paid large fees to the police for protection.

Logging Issues in Post-Conflict Phase

Several issues have arisen as the peace process continues, particularly as that process was made possible in part by the change in political dynamics brought about by the December 2004 tsunami that devastated Aceh.

1. Post-tsunami reconstruction demand: estimate is that need for housing exceeds the total annual timber production of Indonesia. Many international and domestic NGOs are being extra careful to ensure timber used is not taken from Acehnese, or even other Indonesian forest areas, but not everyone is so scrupulous. Reconstruction demands are almost certainly fuelling illegal logging from neighboring areas of Sumatra, while most wood illegally logged in Aceh itself -- generally higher quality wood -- is thought to be going to Medan, North Sumatra, for export elsewhere, including to Malaysia. Indonesia has agreed to WWF green principles for reconstruction of Aceh but the key is in the enforcement.

In July 2005 police chief Gen. Bachrumsyah Kasman was quoted as saying that the police had suspended efforts to halt illegal logging given Aceh's emergency needs. According to one newspaper account, the police chief "said that the Vice President Jusuf Kalla had asked him to take it easy with the apprehension of undocumented transport of wood because Aceh province needed whatever wood it could get."³

2. Problems with demobilisation of GAM combatants

The number of combatants and other GAM members to be demobilised is much greater than originally estimated, and most of these people had depended on GAM to provide for them through "war taxes" that are no longer being collected. With no other income source available and limited funds available for reintegration, the danger is that many may turn to logging. One forestry official has argued that in the absence of other options, regulations against illegal logging are hurting people whose lives depend on forest.⁴ There is an urgent need for alternative sources of income, not only for the combatants but for local people as well. Some international NGOs now planning to implement quick impact public works projects, but it will still take some time to get these up and running.

¹ "Fruits of Deforestation in Leuser", Aceh World, January 31-February 2006, p.4.

² Indonesia Corruption Watch, "Usut Tuntas Illegal Logging dan Dugaan Korupsi Kayu Sitaan Negara di Provinsi NAD", 26 November 2004.

³ "Another Tragedy in Aceh: Illegal Logging," Jakarta Post, 12 July 2005.

⁴ "Pemkab Aceh Singkil Didesak Alihkan Usaha Rakyat," Waspada, 31 January 2006.

The advantage of illegal logging, according to local NGOs who are particularly worried about the dangers to the peace if ex-combatants don't find work, is that one gets paid the same day.

3. Improved Security Means More Logging?

While many fault the Soeharto government for carving up Aceh's forests into hundreds of commercial logging concessions (with Soeharto cronies as prime beneficiaries), the problem of illegal logging is said to have increased dramatically in the free-for-all that followed his fall from power in May 1998. As the conflict between guerrillas and the Indonesian military escalated, forest areas became increasingly unsafe and logging declined somewhat, but Acehnese NGOs say it is rising again as security returns in the wake of the peace agreement.

4. lines of authority, bureaucracy, and corruption

Since the Indonesian parliament approved a massive decentralisation program in 1999, lines of authority among the central, provincial, and district officials have been uncertain in some areas. In Aceh, additional layers of confusion appeared with the special autonomy legislation in 2001, the tsunami in 2004 and efforts to revise the special autonomy law in 2006. Not only is it not always clear who has ultimate authority for enforcing the law against illegal logging at different levels of government (can a ban issued in Jakarta be overridden by the provincial parliament or district council?), but even at the district level, the division of labor between the local forestry office and police is not always clear, and the result is inaction.

Even when there's a will on the part of some government offices to address the problem, corruption can render them ineffective. In Aceh, the corruption takes a variety of forms: Buying and selling logging permits to unscrupulous entrepreneurs; seizing illegal logs and then reselling them; falsely declaring illegal logs to be legally logged, for a price. (Some timber companies claim that the problem is not just corruption, it's red tape: they have to go through 21 different departments to get permits to log legally.⁵)

5. Logging and the proposed division of Aceh

One of the worst areas for illegal logging is Southeast Aceh, and for some years, the district head, Armen Dusky, alleged to be deeply involved in the business, has been campaigning for the division of Aceh into a new province that would be called Aceh Leuser Antara or ALA. He has argued that it would be more efficient for provincial services if people didn't have to travel all the way up to Banda Aceh, that there's been discrimination against people from the south, and, most hypocritically of all, that a new province would be better able to protect the area against illegal logging. Most observers who follow Aceh believe that the creation of ALA would simply foster more forest destruction. Dusky put substantial funds into lobbying parliamentarians but no one took him seriously, until the peace process began.

The army and intelligence are clearly worried that to let GAM take part in the electoral process is to open the doors for losing Aceh through democratic means. How to

⁵ Indonesia: 'Procedures for legal log certificates remain arduous', Jakarta Post, September 11, 2005

stop it? Divide the province so as to weaken GAM and reduce the area of their influence. There now appears to be increasing support for the division, just at the time when Dusky's son has been arrested for corruption and illegal logging. That arrest was made possible by concern in some parts of the government in Jakarta for stopping the logging but the division is supported by another Jakarta-based political interests.

In short, Aceh's forests were hurt by the conflict, but they could be hurt just as much by the peace, unless concerted efforts are made by all levels of the government to protect them.