

Increased flooding in Indonesia linked to deforestation

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A state of emergency was declared for South Kalimantan, Borneo, as torrential rain triggered flooding and landslides, affecting 342,987 people and bringing the death toll to 21 as of last week. According to the National Disaster Management Agency (BNPB), 54,950 houses were flooded, and over 70,000 were displaced.

The floods inundated all but 1 of Kalimantan's 13 districts, the worst affected being Balangan, Banjar, Barito Kuala, Central Hulu Sungai, and Tanah Laut with 209,884 hectares of agricultural land being destroyed, according to the Indonesian Farmers Union. Most of the land was active farmland, comprising rice fields, agriculture and fish farming ponds.

Floodwaters also disabled 21 bridges, including the main bridge in Mataraman District, Banjar Regency, hampering rescue efforts. Government officials have described them as the worst floods to hit the province in 50 years.

Initial estimates by the Agency for The Assessment and Application of Technology (BPPT) report total economic losses of 1.349 trillion Rupiah (\$US96.1 million), factoring in long term effects and remediation.

The events occurred in what has been a destructive start of natural disasters to the new year. The BNPB reported a total of 185 natural disasters which had hit Indonesia in the first three weeks of 2021.

"Most are in the form of floods, hurricanes and landslides," BNPB representative Professor Wiku stated in a press conference this week.

While this is a smaller number than last year, 166 people have died so far in January 2021, as compared to 91 from January 2020.

Weather reports indicate that heavy rains are expected to continue in South Kalimantan until February, and Indonesia's Meteorology, Climatology and Geophysics

Agency (BMKG) has warned of an increase in "multiple disaster risks" up until March 2021.

President Joko Widodo travelled to the affected areas last week, inspecting damaged buildings, evacuation efforts and aid logistics. He stated that the floods were the unavoidable outcome of unusually high rainfall, causing the central Barito river to overflow.

His comments prompted rebukes from environmental scientists and advocates, who pointed to the devastating effects of deforestation from palm oil and mining operations. Such activities had led to a reduction in the storage capacity of the Barito River watershed, leading to more destructive flooding.

Indonesia is the largest producer of palm oil in the world, which is used in many household products. In 2019, Indonesia produced an estimated 48.42 million metric tons of crude palm oil.

Despite efforts to boycott the commodity, the Indonesian government is proceeding with a plan to develop domestic fuel sourced entirely from its palm oil plantations. Currently the biodiesel blend (B30) sold at gas stations contains 30 percent palm oil. In order to better meet domestic fuel demand, the government estimates it will need to establish 15 million hectares of new plantations.

In an interview with Tempo magazine, Indonesian Forum for the Environment (WALHI) of South Kalimantan Director Kisworo Dwi Cahyono stated, "If [the President] only blames the rain, it would have been better that he had not come here."

"South Kalimantan stretches 3.7 million hectares that has 13 regencies and cities, but is burdened by 50 percent mining permits, 33 percent are palm oil fields," he stated, adding that such an ecological disaster had been repeatedly warned about by the area's branch office.

“The government is yet again ill-prepared. The people are once again who must bear the consequences,” said Kisworo.

Arie Rompas from the Indonesian section of Greenpeace echoed these concerns to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), stating that floods and landslides were among the chief natural disasters in recent years.

“It’s strongly related to the accumulated damage to forests that have an impact on climate change,” he said.

The government’s own research agency, BPPT, confirmed these assessments when it stated that a reduction in high density vegetation in upstream areas had compromised water storage functions, according to the Indonesian Nusa Daily.

In 2019, 324,000 hectares of primary forest was cleared, according to Global Forest Watch. Since 2001 this brings the total land cleared to 9.4 million hectares of primary forest.

In South Kalimantan, two thirds of the natural forest in its water catchment area has been cleared since 1991, according to government data cited by Mongabay, an environmental news website. Greenpeace has recorded a similar trend using satellite imagery which revealed that 304,000 hectares had been lost between 2001 and 2019.

As well as exacerbating the effects of flooding, the landscape has changed to one highly susceptible to landslides caused by erosion and fragile soil.

The government has doubled down on Widodo’s position, dismissing what it claims is “misinformation” and “invalid data” being pushed by other parties.

The environmental director at the Ministry of Energy and Mineral Resources, Lana Saria, went so far as to say that mining activity in the region makes a positive contribution to the forests.

“It in fact improves the capability of the watershed to become a water catchment area,” she said.

Mining activity presents serious problems caused by acid mine drainage in which surface water reacts with rocks containing sulphur-bearing minerals, creating sulphuric acid. This can then leach away heavy metals from exposed rocks becoming highly toxic.

Calls for more stringent measures to protect the environment have fallen on deaf ears. Indonesia suffered its first recession in 20 years in the third quarter of 2020. Finance Minister Sri Mulyani

estimated a GDP contraction of 1.7–2.2 per cent for 2020 earlier this year and projected a rebound of 4.5–5.5 per cent in 2021.

This rebound is contingent on the government’s strategy to scrap legislation for mining companies and plantations that will pave the way for the acceleration of deforestation.

Last year’s pro-business omnibus law, rammed through parliament despite popular opposition, revises 26 articles and shreds another seven from the 2014 Plantation Law. Most critical is the relaxing of environmental permits for developers, who are now given slap-on-the-wrist sanctions if found to be without permits and a three-year grace period to obtain them.

Environmental impact assessments are not required unless the operation is deemed to be “high risk”, and those found neglecting the environment or lacking firefighting equipment will not lose their permits.



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