

Legalization of Ecological Disasters in West Sumatra, Aceh, and North Sumatra, and Demands for State and Corporate Responsibility

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WALHI, Wahan Lingkungan Hidup Indonesia, <https://walhi.or.id>

Jakarta, December 1, 2025. The floods and landslides that struck Aceh, North Sumatra, and West Sumatra from November 25 to 27 caused 442 deaths, left 402 people missing, and forced 156,918 people to evacuate. According to WALHI's records, this disaster was caused by increasing ecological vulnerability resulting from changes to important ecosystems such as forests, and was further intensified by the climate crisis. Between 2016 and 2025, 1.4 million hectares of forest in Aceh, North Sumatra, and West Sumatra were deforested due to the activities of 631 companies[1] holding permits for mining, palm oil cultivation rights (HGU), forest utilization business licensing (PBPH), geothermal projects, hydropower plants (PLTA), and small-scale hydropower plants (PLTM).

Looking more closely, the disasters in these three provinces originated in major watershed areas whose upstream zones are located in the forest landscape of the Bukit Barisan mountain range. In North Sumatra, for example, the most severe disasters affected areas within the Harangan Tapanuli Ecosystem, also known as the Batang Toru Ecosystem, namely South Tapanuli Regency, Central Tapanuli Regency, North Tapanuli Regency, and the city of Sibolga. The Batang Toru Ecosystem, located within the Bukit Barisan landscape, experienced deforestation of 72,938 hectares between 2016 and 2024 as a result of the operations of 18 companies.

In Aceh, there are 954 watersheds, 60% of which lie within forest areas, with 20 watersheds classified as critical. The Krueng Trumon Watershed covers an area of 53,824 hectares. Between 2016 and 2022, 43% of this watershed lost its forest cover; today, only 30,568 hectares, or around 57%, remain. The Singkil Watershed, as designated by the government under Decree SK 580, covers an area of 1,241,775 hectares. However, by 2022, only 421,531 hectares of forest cover remained. This means that over the past ten years, the Singkil Watershed has experienced forest-cover degradation of 820,243 hectares, or 66%.

The Jambo Aye Watershed originally covered 479,451 hectares, with 44.71% damaged. The Peusangan Watershed, covering 245,323 hectares, has suffered 75.04% damage. The Krueng Tripa Watershed, with a total area of 313,799 hectares, has suffered 42.42% damage. The Tamiang Watershed, covering 494,988 hectares, has suffered 36.45% damage.

In West Sumatra, the Aia Dingin Watershed is one of the important administrative watersheds in the city of Padang, covering 12,802 hectares. Topographically, the upstream area of the watershed ranges from flat to steep slopes, with its upper reaches located within the Bukit Barisan Conservation Forest Area, which should function as a key ecological barrier. However, the area has been severely degraded due to pressure from human activities. From 2001 to 2024, the Aia Dingin Watershed lost 780 hectares of tree cover, with most deforestation occurring in the upstream area, which plays a vital role in reducing surface runoff and preventing flash floods.

Ahmad Solihin, Executive Director of WALHI Aceh, said: "The floods that have paralyzed at least 16 districts in Aceh send a strong message: nature is no longer able to withstand the burden of destruction imposed by humans. This disaster is not merely a natural phenomenon, but an ecological disaster produced by government policies that are negligent, permissive, and

facilitate the destruction of people's living spaces through extractive investments that greedily consume land.

These recurring floods are the accumulated result of deforestation, palm oil expansion, and illegal gold mining — known as **Pertambangan Emas Tanpa Izin** or **PETI** — which has been allowed to spread unchecked. The government has failed to stop the destruction upstream and has allowed it to continue, while remaining fixated on patchwork downstream solutions such as building river embankments and river normalization.”

Riandra, Executive Director of WALHI North Sumatra, stated: “The most critical areas are Central Tapanuli, Sibolga, and South Tapanuli, whose upstream areas lie within the Batang Toru Ecosystem. Over the past eight years, WALHI North Sumatra has continuously criticized the management model of Batang Toru. For example, the Batang Toru hydropower plant, besides threatening to fragment the habitat of orangutans and tigers, also damages river bodies and river flows that form the environmental carrying capacity and resilience of the area.

In addition, there is gold mining located directly on the Batang Toru River. Other villages in Sipirok District are also affected by timber plantation partnership activities with PT Toba Pulp Lestari, which have ultimately converted forest areas. All these exploitative activities have been legalized by the government through the process of releasing forest areas for permits via spatial planning revisions.”

Andre Bustamar from WALHI West Sumatra stated that the disasters in West Sumatra were caused by the accumulation of an environmental crisis resulting from the government's failure to manage natural resources. Deforestation, illegal gold mining, and weak law enforcement are the reasons why West Sumatra continues to be hit by ecological disasters.

The phenomenon of tree stumps being swept away by river currents indicates logging activity in the upstream watershed areas. This strengthens the suspicion that forest exploitation practices are still ongoing and are a direct cause of the increased risk of ecological disasters. The ecological disaster that occurred in West Sumatra places the state — in this case, the West Sumatra Provincial Government — as the actor most responsible for protecting its people from disaster risks.

Uli Arta Siagian, Forest and Plantation Campaign Manager at WALHI National, said: “From these facts, we can clearly see that the causes of the current ecological disaster are state officials and corporations. Therefore, the responsibility of state officials is to evaluate all company permits in Indonesia, especially in important and critical ecosystems. If permits need to be revoked, then they must be revoked.

Moreover, the Minister of Forestry has already said that permits will be evaluated. So now we are demanding that this be done. We have the names of the companies — please evaluate them and enforce the law. Do not merely make promises while hundreds of thousands of people in Sumatra are grieving.

Another matter is to demand corporate accountability for covering the external costs of the disaster that has occurred. The state must not bear these external costs alone, because the money used would be state money, sourced from our taxes. In our view, the state must also demand that corporations take responsibility for restoring the ecosystems they have damaged. They have enjoyed huge profits from exploiting nature; now it is time for them to be held responsible for restoring it.”

Gandar Mahojwala, Executive Director of WALHI Yogyakarta, stated: “BMKG has said that on November 17, a Low Pressure Area was detected. BMKG’s press release emphasized the importance of local governments beginning to be alert to the potential for hydrometeorological disasters. On November 21, 2025, BMKG stated that the Low Pressure Area had developed into a tropical cyclone seed. These two pieces of information show that the early warnings had already clearly indicated the potential for disaster, but the government did not take serious action in response to those early warnings.”

“As has been explained by WALHI North Sumatra, West Sumatra, and Aceh in the media, this disaster also has non-natural causes. The main trigger is not nature alone, but vulnerability caused by companies that damage the environmental carrying capacity and resilience of the area. This confirms that there is no such thing as a purely ‘natural disaster.’ The term ‘natural disaster’ seems to make nature the scapegoat for disasters. In fact, the occurrence of disasters is strongly influenced by vulnerabilities created by companies that control large areas of land,” Gandar explained.

“The government also needs to act firmly and immediately approve a mechanism for Disaster Risk Analysis, a research and study process concerning activities that may lead to disasters. Disaster Risk Analysis is already regulated in Article 40 paragraph (3) of Law No. 24 of 2007 on Disaster Management. This article states that every development activity with a high risk of causing disasters must include a disaster risk analysis as part of disaster management efforts, in accordance with the relevant authority. This instrument is important and must be approved immediately to ensure that no more companies increase or enable the occurrence of disasters,” Gandar concluded.

Melva Harahap, Manager for Ecological Disaster Response and Prevention at WALHI National, also stated that the ecological disaster in Sumatra has caused the collapse of the structures of daily life in the three provinces. People have suffered material losses, such as losing homes, family members, possessions, livestock, plantations, and the right to live in safety and comfort, including the right to a healthy environment, all of which disappeared instantly when this ecological disaster occurred.

On the other hand, the disaster has also damaged infrastructure: roads have been destroyed, electricity has gone out, communication signals have been cut off, fuel has become scarce, and food supplies are decreasing day by day, leaving residents isolated. The people’s rights to work, to study, and to have other basic needs fulfilled cannot be met. Yet Law No. 24 of 2007 on Disaster Management obliges the state to protect people from disasters. The facts on the ground show that the state has failed to fulfill the basic rights and right to life for which it is responsible.

“From a humanitarian perspective, declaring this a national disaster is important in responding to the ecological disaster that has occurred in Sumatra. Coordination between institutions and ministries is essential so that the distribution of basic necessities, the evacuation of residents who remain isolated, the fulfilment of people’s basic and life needs, and the preparation of long-term recovery can happen more quickly. Such a declaration would allow the full mobilization of national resources in responding to this ecological disaster.

However, it must be remembered that it is important for the state to demand corporate accountability and not to classify this as a natural disaster, because such a designation would have consequences for the release of corporate responsibility,” Melva concluded.

Going forward, ecological disasters will continue to spread and occur more frequently as a result of climate policies that are neither ambitious nor based on human rights, and which instead encourage large-scale emissions from energy projects. The decisions made at COP30 — especially those that advance false solutions in the energy sector and expand carbon trading mechanisms — are feared to make ecological disasters in Indonesia more frequent and widespread.

This is because such approaches do not reduce dependence on fossil energy, have the potential to worsen the seizure of living spaces and ecosystem destruction, and divert attention from the urgent need to achieve real emissions reductions. Therefore, we emphasize that offset schemes and pseudo-technologies actually open the way to an intensification of the climate crisis, from deforestation to increased risks of hydrometeorological disasters. We call for a just energy transition, based on environmental protection and the rights of communities, as the only way to prevent greater ecological destruction in Indonesia.

Contact person:

WALHI Public Engagement
+62 811-5501-980

[1] Details of company permits: 36 companies holding PBPH permits; 146 companies holding palm oil HGU permits; 400 companies holding mining business permits; 11 companies holding geothermal permits; 38 companies holding small-scale hydropower plant permits; and 1 company holding a hydropower plant permit.

Note

This is an English version of the Indonesian article published by WALHI, <https://walhi.or.id>

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It has been translated using ChatGPT.

The article that refers to this article:

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