

Calls for Accountability after Coal-slurry Spill in Indonesian River

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A coal-slurry spill into a river in Indonesian Borneo has killed hundreds of fish and forced authorities to shut off water lines to households.

The waste-management facility at coal miner PT Kayan Putra Utama Coal’s site in North Kalimantan province was reportedly breached on the evening of Feb. 7. The slurry spilled into the Malinau River and other waterways, including the Sesayap River, home for the nearly extinct Irrawaddy dolphin (*Orcaella brevirostris*).

By the morning of Feb. 8, the water in the Malinau had turned brown and cloudy, and nearly a thousand dead fish were found floating on the surface, according to residents. The local water board, which pipes its water from the river, shut off its pipeline over concerns that the pollution would contaminate the area’s water supply. The water supply was cut off for two days, according to Rosiena Kila, a resident of the district of Malinau, who also shared photos on Facebook of the dead fish. She added that residents had to collect rainwater during this time.



A dead fish collected by residents from the polluted Malinau River. Image courtesy of Rosiena Kila.

On Feb. 10, the North Kalimantan provincial legislature issued a letter to local authorities to investigate the incident.

“If it’s proven that the environmental pollution was caused by a certain company, we hope the government will certainly take an assertive move by demanding responsibility from the company — administrative, civic and criminal,” the letter, signed by councilor Hasan Basri, said.

Residents say the spill wasn’t the first of its kind in Malinau, where coal mining is a major industry, but that it was the worst. “Coal slurry spills are a classic problem in Malinau,” Rosiena said.

Five companies manage mining concessions along the Malinau River, according to data from the Mining Advocacy Network (Jatam), an NGO. They are PT Artha Marth Naha Kramo, PT Amarta Teknik Indonesia (ATI), PT Kayan Putra Utama Coal (KPUC), PT Baradinamika Muda Sukses (BMS), and PT Mitrabara Adiperdana (MA).

Jatam has recorded coal slurry spills in the river dating back to 2010. One particular incident, in 2017, was so severe that authorities ordered the company responsible, BMS, to suspend its operations for 60 days. In 2018, Jatam published a report showing the deterioration of the Malinau River’s ecosystem over the years due to mining activities. It cited complaints from residents that the river was turning darker and muddier, and fish populations had declined. Residents have also stopped using the river for bathing in or washing their clothes.

The problems of weak enforcement of environmental regulations, a lax licensing process, and a general failure to rehabilitate the river ecosystem mean there’s no deterrent effect for the coal companies, said Andry Lalingka, coordinator of Jatam’s North Kalimantan chapter.

He added that, for residents, losing access to the river meant economic losses, given how reliant they are on the Malinau as both a source of water and a transport conduit.

“It’s fair to suspect that mining companies intentionally do this [spill slurry] to reduce the load on their waste facilities,” Andry said.



One of the smaller channels branching off the Malinau River has also been polluted. Image courtesy of the Mining Advocacy Network.

KPUC, the miner accused in the latest spill, has [apologized](#) for its negligence and promised to help distribute clean water to affected residents. It holds two permits allowing it to mine a combined 4,476 hectares (11,061 acres) of forest.

Government records identify KPUC’s beneficial owners as Soesanto, Gunawan Santoso, Lauw Kardono Lesmono, and Hendry Lesmana. Other names listed in the corporate deeds are Soegwanto, Ery Santi, and Juanda Lesmana. Juanda Lesmana is a prominent businessman with interests in North Kalimantan’s logging, shipping, and hospitality industries. He has also publicly backed politicians running in local and national elections, including the current governor and deputy governor of North Kalimantan, Zainal Paliwang and Yansen Tipa Padan.

While those ties suggest any punishment for KPUC will likely be trivial, Rosien said she still hopes justice will be served.

“Pity the people of Malinau who depend on the water and natural resources,” she said. “I hope the government of Malinau and other responsible stakeholders will immediately bring sanctions that can give a deterrent effect to the company so that this won’t happen again.”

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