

Indonesian Law Enforcers Call for Financial Approach to Fight Illegal Logging

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Authorities should go after illegal loggers with financial charges like money laundering, Indonesian officials said last week at an online panel.

Officials from the Attorney General’s Office and the anti-money-laundering agency, known as the PPATK, were among those to endorse the approach.

“We have to take a financial approach, especially money laundering,” said R. Narendra Jatna, special assistant to the attorney general.

“We have to look at timber as a commodity — that makes trafficking in it different from ordinary crimes,” he added. “If we view it as a commodity, that means we can look at the corporations and even the organized criminal elements behind it.”

The [panel](#), titled “Can the Indonesian Judicial System Punish the Timber Mafia?,” was moderated by Kaoem Telapak, an NGO that recently put out a [report](#) with a London-based NGO, the Environmental Investigation Agency, about how illegal loggers in the country were going largely unpunished.

Indonesia is home to part of the world’s third-largest rainforest, which stretches across the island of New Guinea, but it also has one of the world’s highest rates of deforestation.

Illegal logging remains rampant. Between 2015 and 2020, the Indonesian Ministry of Environment and Forestry handled 497 illegal logging cases, more than any other type of environmental crime and with each year seeing more cases than the next, Yazid Nurguda, the ministry’s director of criminal law enforcement, said during the panel.

The police, meanwhile, handled 272 illegal logging cases in 2020, up from 74 cases each in 2019 and 2018, but down from 575 in 2017 and 507 in 2016, according to Pipit Rismanto, head of the National Police’s “specific crimes” department.

“Previous convictions have not provided a deterrent effect,” Pipit said during the panel.



An illegal logging operation in Indonesia’s Central Kalimantan province. Image by Rhett A. Butler/Mongabay.

Budi Saiful Haris, a senior analyst at the PPATK, spoke about how Indonesia’s 2010 anti-money-laundering law could be wielded against illegal loggers.

Instead of merely arresting smaller actors in the field, he said, investigators should target the masterminds behind illegal logging schemes.

“There are other actors who aren’t always apparent in the field, who can be revealed by looking at financial crimes,” he said.

While Indonesia’s forestry law was helpful domestically, the anti-money-laundering law could be especially useful in pursuing transnational elements of the trade in illegal timber, Narendra said.

“Reaching the ‘mafia’ outside Indonesia is very difficult,” he said. To address both the domestic and international elements of illegal logging requires taking an anti-money-laundering approach, he added.

Budi called for the police and forestry ministry to create protocols for identifying indications of money laundering in forestry crime cases.

He also called for law enforcers to create a target for a certain number of forestry crime cases to be handled this way.

Narendra also suggested that bribery of law enforcers in Indonesia — which ranked 102 out of 180 countries in Transparency International’s 2020 Corruption Perceptions Index — was

an impediment to fighting illegal logging.

“It could be that in cases of illegal logging, there are bribes to officials, which could be classified as criminal acts of corruption or tax evasion,” he said.

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Featured image: Logs at a sawmill in Indonesia. Image by Rhett A. Butler/Mongabay.

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