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Indonesia: Indigenous rights group highlights increase in land grabs under Jokowi's watch

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Jakarta — The Nusantara Traditional Community Alliance (AMAN) and the Nusantara Traditional Community Defense Association (PPMAN) have highlighted the polemic over the forced relocation of residents from Rempang Island, Batam, in the Riau Islands, to make way for the Eco City national strategic project (PSN).

AMAN Deputy Secretary General for political and legal affairs Erasmus Cahyadi believes that safety and identity of Malayu (Malay) traditional communities who have lived for generations in 16 ancient villages on Rempang is currently under serious threat.

“This is because the state is more pro-foreign investment, which takes refuge in the name of national strategic projects and is backed by [government] policies and oppressive state officials”, Cahyadi said in a written statement on Monday September 18.

According to Cahyadi, the government through the Batam Free Port Agency (BP Batam) has arrogantly mobilised the armed forces and is attempting to forcibly remove the indigenous peoples on Rempang Island Batam from their land and cultural roots that they have inherited from their ancestors for hundreds of years or at least since the beginning of the 18th century.

Cahyadi believes that this incident adds to the black list of cruelty by the state towards indigenous peoples, particularly over the last 10 years of President Joko “Jokowi” Widodo’s rule.

Under the administration of president Widodo, said Cahyadi, incidents of land grabs of traditional community lands has increased in concert with the implementation of national strategic projects and other investments.

“In the name of investment, the government does not hesitate to seize, displace and commit violence against indigenous peoples who have lived for hundreds of years on customary lands”, he said.

The National Human Rights Commission (Komnas HAM) has reported that 692 agrarian conflicts occurred over the last eight months of 2023. Meanwhile, said Cahyadi, AMAN has also noted that there had been 301 cases related to the deprivation of customary land in 2019-2023.

“The various cases that have occurred show that the government has been playing with its power, is arrogant and shameless because it violates the basic principles of the country and does not meet the aims of Indonesia’s independence”, he said.

Cahyadi believes that the current government has forgotten that the state is obliged to advance public’s welfare and protect every drop of Indonesia’s blood as aspired to in the country’s struggle

for independence.

“Meaning, all of the administration’s actions should refer to the aims of the country. That is also the reason why an independent country should be different from its colonisers”, he said.

Cahyadi said that AMAN condemns, opposes and is urging both the government and investors to stop the seizure of indigenous communities’ land and all acts of violence against the residents and indigenous peoples of Rempang Island.

“We also urge the government, especially BP Batam to avoid escalating the conflict that will result in even more casualties by not continuing to pursue the relocation target of September 28, 2023”, said Cahyadi.

President Widodo has spoken out about residents’ opposition to being relocated to make way for the Eco City project on Rempang Island. According to Widodo, the opposition that ended in a clash between residents and police occurred because of a lack of communication.

He said that the residents that will be affected have already been provided with compensation in the form of land and houses. In relation to the location however, there was a lack of good communication.

“This is just a miscommunication, there’s been a miscommunication. They’ve been given compensation, given land, given houses but maybe the location is not right yet, that should be resolved”, said Widodo during an event in Jakarta titled “Eight Years of National Strategic Projects” on Wednesday September 13.

Thousands of Rempang Island residents are threatened with having to leave their villages to make way for the Eco City strategic national project.

The project, which is being worked on by the company PT Makmur Elok Graha (MEG), will use 7,572 hectares of land or around 45.89 percent of a total of 16 hectares of land on Rempang Island for the project.

The thousands of residents however do not accept that they had to leave the land they have lived on long before Indonesia proclaimed independence. They are determined to defend their land even though TNI (Indonesian military) and police have been deployed so that they will agree to be relocated.

A clash was inevitable. On September 7 and 11 clashes broke out. Police fired teargas, some of which landed in a school, and children had to be rushed to hospital. So far, 43 people opposing the relocation have been arrested and accused of being provocateurs.

CNN Indonesia

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