When we fight for our rights we can win:

Indonesian farmer’s land returned after 15 years

Central Sulawesi farmer and land defender Hemsi has fought relentlessly against PT Mamuang, a subsidiary of Astra Agro Lestari (Indonesia’s 2nd largest palm oil company), since it forcibly took over his land in 2005. The company has been embroiled in protracted land conflicts with local farmers ever since it began operations in the area and tried to grab land that it claimed was included in their Right to Cultivate although it never provided evidence as such.

Farmers that tried to defend their rights have been subject to repression, violence, intimidation, and criminalisation. Hemsi was imprisoned three times and regularly received threats to himself and his family. He has now received recognition of his rights over 20 of the 50 hectares the company tried to take due to his tireless resistance, the backing of his community, and legal support and advocacy targeting the financiers of Agro Astra Lestari by the Indonesian Forum for Environment (WALHI) and other members of the Friends of the Earth network.
The head of Lalundu and Panca Mukti village and legal experts go to the field to take measurements in accordance with the governor’s decree in 1999, which stated that Hemsi’s plantation area was included in the Panca Mukti Village area in Central Sulawesi (outside PT Mamuang’s Right to Cultivate area, situated in West Sulawesi).

The company sends a group to build a hut next to Hemsi’s and threaten him with death if he and his family do not leave the plantation. Hemsi finds solidarity in 200 people in Rio Pakava villages who agree to help him defend his land.

In 2009, 20 of the 50 hectares of land grabbed by PT Mamuang are returned to Hemsi and he receives a formal land certificate from the National Land Agency. The other 30 hectares are still in the process.
How Hemsi won

Despite the numerous hardships and obstacles, Hemsi never let go of the belief that he should fight for what rightfully belongs to him. Community organising was central to strengthening resistance and building solidarity and support from other farmers to provide safety and strength in numbers. Engaging with government authorities and legal strategies also contributed to the successful return of Hemsi’s land. His trip to the Netherlands to meet with policy makers and financiers was key to stopping the company from replanting palm on his land. Hemsi was supported by the international community, providing both a morale boost and additional pressure on decision makers at the company and government.

“I’m not afraid to fight, the struggle doesn’t end here. As long as I’m still alive, I will continue to fight against injustice. No matter how many threats or subpoenas are sent to me, no matter how many times they put me in jail, I will never stop defending my rights. I invite my friends to keep fighting so that our rights are not taken arbitrarily by these companies.”

Call to Action

Hemsi and his community call upon those affected by similar struggles or organisations and people that want to join the struggle. The impacts of industrial monoculture plantations and related land grabbing are unacceptable. Violence, sometimes resulting in death; criminalisation of community members; and environmental pollution all have a profound impact on communities’ health and wellbeing. United in international alliances, we can support communities and environmental human rights defenders locally. At the same time, we campaign for system change, such as the UN Binding Treaty for Business and Human Rights and international legislation that holds companies and the financial sector accountable for deforestation and human rights violations.

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