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PEOPLES
VOICES

Surtini

the Indonesian people against the mining giant PT. Newmont Minahasa Raya—a subsidiary of Newmont Mining Corporation based in Denver, Colorado, USA

Newmont comes to Buyat

Surtini Paputungan is a 40-year-old cookie-and-fish-seller living in Buyat, a small village at the Buyat Bay in a remote region of Indonesia. From Jakarta the capital city of Indonesia, it needs four hours by plane and then around three hours by bus to get there. She is married and has four children. She is poor, like other villagers in her community. Her family's life depends on a small boat without motor, simple fishhooks and a net. Such tools can only be used for small distance fishing when the sea calms during October to February. The sea was used to be rich with coral fish. Buyat Bay provided coral fishes as living sources for its neighboring villages. At the peak fishing season, Surtini sells fish caught by her husband in the village market. When there were strong winds no one went fishing, and Surtini sold home backed cookies. The earnings were only enough for a simple living. Sometimes they had to borrow money from neighbors and bought food on credit at the village's small store, which would be repaid from the luck of the following catch.

Life of that poor fisher community with 53 households, around 240 persons, took a turn for the worse as a gold mining company PT. Newmont Minahasa Raya—a subsidiary of Newmont Mining Corporation based in Denver, Colorado, USA, the fifth biggest mining company of the world—got a mining licence from Indonesian government in 1994 for around 500 hectares of land. Newmont started to operate an open pit mine in 1996 and daily disposed around 2,000 tons of tailings (mining waste) directly into the Buyat Bay. It used a technology called 'Submarine Tailing Disposal' (STD), only about 82 m below sea level. Leaks of the pipe have occurred several times. Some studies by researches from the university in North Sulawesi, Agriculture Institute in Bogor and the Indonesian government environmental impact monitoring agency showed that Buyat Bay is now polluted by heavy metals such as arsenic, cadmium and mercury.

The only sources of livelihood of the community are polluted and destroyed, coral reefs are damaged, and many fish have been found rotten on the beach. It is more difficult to get fish. Even when they do get it, nobody wants to buy the fish catch because they are afraid to eat poisoned fishes. The life of Surtini and her family became more difficult because her husband could not afford a motorboat to go further from the bay to the still unpolluted fishing grounds.

Surtini stopped baking and selling cookies in 1998, as she started to suffer pain in all her joints. Her whole body became numb, with headaches, myopia, hearing disorder, and difficulty to talk. The worst was in 1999 as she became paralyzed for about three months. Her hair could not be touched because it was very painful. The village clinic could not explain what was wrong with her. The doctor provided by Newmont stated that nothing had happened to her, though a couple of weeks later a team from Newmont came to take blood-samples of Surtini and other villagers. A year later, after pressure from national and international NGOs to disclose the result of that blood examination in a laboratory in Santa Monica in USA, Newmont admitted that blood of the villagers was contaminated with arsenic, mercury and cyanide.

Surtini stopped eat fish from Buyat Bay because she realized that her health was getting worse when she consumed it. She overcame the paralysis and got better. The pain in her joints and headaches often returned, in particular after eating fish from Buyat Bay, as she had no other alternative food. In October 2001 Surtini was brought to Jakarta by NGOs to have a medical check-up and stayed for one week in hospital. Doctors could not explain her sickness. This also showed that difficult it

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Suwiryo is an activist working on issue of environment and human rights. He advocates the issue that environmental destruction is a human right violation.

Source:

— Verrianto Madjowa, Kemelut tambang emas Minahasa, Rekonstruksi kasus 1986-2001, Jakarta, 2002

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