

Logging not to blame for Indonesia flood – minister

11 November 2003

JAKARTA: Indonesia's forestry minister said yesterday a flood that devastated a resort village and killed more than 130 people on the edge of a national park was not caused by illegal logging.

A government spokesman in North Sumatra province, where the November 3 disaster occurred, said it could take a month to find all the victims. He said 134 bodies had been found so far, six of them foreigners.

The province's governor said last week at least 170 people had been killed in the flood, while rescuers have said they were searching for at least 150 more bodies.

Environment officials and activists have blamed the flood on rampant illegal logging that has destroyed parts of the huge Gunung Leuser National Park that surrounds the resort village of Bukit Lawang on Sumatra island.

Even President Megawati Sukarnoputri said "arrogant" environmental destruction was the cause.

But her forestry minister, Muhammad Prakosa, blamed nature.

"It was not because of illegal logging. It was a genuine natural disaster," Prakosa told reporters.

"We have sent an investigation team there and the result was there was a landslide from a steep hill smashing the many natural dams along the slope that were previously covered by wood, prompting a water rush."

Asked about the heaps of logs that came crashing down with the flood, smashing guesthouses, restaurants and homes in the middle of the night as people slept, Prakosa said: "They were uprooted trees."

The riverside resort was a popular base, particularly with young Western backpackers, for trekking and rafting trips in the park and for visits to a nearby orang-utan reserve.



GRIM SEARCH: Indonesian police search through the logs washed down from last week's deadly flash floods in the North Sumatra resort village of Bukit Lawang, yesterday. Indonesia's forestry minister insisted the floods, which killed at least 170, were not a result of illegal logging as many environment officials and activists claimed.

Reuters

Indonesia has a dismal record for environmental protection and conservationists say its huge tropical forests are rapidly disappearing at the hands of illegal loggers.

According to some estimates, 75 per cent of its forests have been cut down in the past few decades. Smoke from fires set by land-clearers regularly blankets parts of Southeast Asia and much of the archipelago's wildlife is on the brink of extinction.

Environment Minister Nabel Makarim said last week the military was involved in illegal felling. A military spokesman denied that.

The provincial spokesman said it would take another month to clean up the destruction the Bukit Lawang flood left in its wake.

The provincial government planned to rebuild the resort, but it would be closed to tourists for up to six months, he said.

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