

Sidoarjo disaster man-made: Experts

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The mudflow disaster in Sidoarjo, East Java, is a man-made disaster and any effort to argue otherwise should be viewed as an attempt to escape responsibility, drilling experts and an environmentalist said Tuesday. "All theories that explain the mudflow as an uncontrollable natural disaster have been proven wrong by scientific facts," said Rudi Rubiani, a drilling expert from the Bandung Institute of Technology.

The conclusion came as East Java Police plan to continue a probe into the possibility human error was behind the mudflow, which has continued unabated since May 2006. The government has officially declared the mudflow crisis a national disaster.

Rudi said Lapindo Brantas Inc., the company allegedly responsible for the disaster, had developed three theories as to what may have caused it.

The first theory revolves around the fact a geothermal overflow triggered the mud eruption. However, Rudi said the mud surface temperature in Sidoarjo proves the theory incorrect. "If it was caused by a geothermal overflow, the surface temperature would reach 250 degrees Celsius, but the surface temperature in Sidoarjo is only 100 degrees Celsius," he said, as quoted by Antara.

Rudi said the company's second theory -- that the mudflow was caused by a mountain of mud under the surface of the earth -- was also unlikely. "Mud would not overflow without a trigger. In this case the trigger was definitely the mining activities," said Rudi.

According to the third theory, the mudflow was caused by a large earthquake that jolted Yogyakarta two days earlier. However, Rudi said Sidoarjo was located 300 kilometers from the earthquake site and therefore would not have been greatly affected by the tremor.

Mustiko Saleh, a drilling expert and former deputy director of State Oil Company Pertamina, agreed with Rudi's ideas. He said if the mudflow was caused naturally, it would not be on such a large scale. "Actually, under-earth overflow has occurred quite often at exploration wells in Indonesia and can be handled as long as an effort to contain it is conducted immediately," said Mustiko.

The mudflow started on May 29, 2006. Since then, the disaster has uprooted thousands of local residents from their homes. Greenomics Indonesia estimates that the country has lost about Rp. 90 trillion per day due to the mudflow since it started.

The Indonesian Environmental Forum (Walhi) and the Indonesian Legal Aid Institute both filed civil lawsuits against Lapindo Brantas over the mudflow disaster. However, their accusations were rejected by two separate district courts.

Both courts ruled that the mudflow disaster had nothing to do with Lapindo's mining activities and the company had paid sufficient compensation to the victims. Both verdicts drew strong public criticism, with Walhi appealing. "There have been systematic efforts in publications to portray the Lapindo mudflow as just another natural disaster," said Walhi's executive director Chalid Muhammad.

He urged law enforcers to free themselves from personal and short-term interests because the mudflow had caused huge amounts of damage both to the state and the people.