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Villagers say Hartati's thugs forced them off their land

The Jakarta Post, Jakarta | National | Sat, October 20 2012, 9:44 AM

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An allegation that her plantation company forced villagers to leave their lands came as another blow for businesswoman Siti Hartati Murdaya, a suspect in a bribery scandal.

Hartati seemingly will have to divide her interrogation time between the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) and the National Commission on Human Rights (Komnas HAM) which plans to summon her.

Komnas HAM now plans to summon Hartati after a group of farmers from Central Sulawesi came to the rights body on Friday alleging human rights violations committed by personnel from Hartati's company.

The farmers who came from a remote part of Buol, Central Sulawesi, claimed that their land was taken away by Hartati's company, PT Hardaya Inti Plantation (PT HIP) in 1993.

"At first, people from the company told us that they would construct roads. We were very happy back then because the roads would ease our access," said Paraman Yunus, one of the farmers who came to the Komnas HAM office in Jakarta.

However, Paraman said, the planned road never materialized. Instead, local people were forced to abandon their homes and lands.

"Some of our houses were even set ablaze," he said.

Hartati, a former member of the board of patrons of the Democratic Party, is currently in detention by the KPK for her alleged involvement in a bribery scandal implicating former Buol regent Amran Batalipu.

The KPK believe that the businesswoman gave Rp 3 billion (US\$312,744) to Amran to expedite a business permit for her company, PT HIP.

PT HIP owns around 75,000 hectares of land in Buol of which around 22,000 hectare have secured permits as a palm oil plantation.

However, Paraman said that actually some 4,487 hectares of PT HIP's land belongs to locals.

"In 1993, they chased us away from our homes and land," he said, adding that some of those who forced villagers off their land wore military uniforms.

For more than 10 years, locals have fought to reclaim their land.

Dialogues and meetings between farmers, PT HIP and the local administration have taken place several times.

Their efforts, according to Sudarmin J Paliba from the Buol Farmers Forum, are invariably futile.

Sudarmin said that PT HIP had promised farmers compensation for their loss. However the company never met its promises.

Komnas HAM deputy chairman M. Ridha Saleh said that his office would collect data in relation to the human rights allegations. **(riz)**

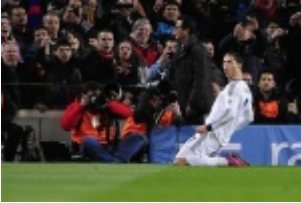
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