

Forestry minister denies backing illegal loggers

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Forestry minister M.S. Kaban has said he had nothing to do with the Medan District Court's recent ruling -- in which businessman Adelin Lis was acquitted of all charges -- and blamed the prosecutors for indicting the logging boss with weak charges that ended in his acquittal.

Addressing a radio talk show titled *You destroy the forest, I set you free*, Kaban, who was in Medan, North Sumatra, said over the telephone he did not defend Adelin, but the forest concession issued by the forestry ministry.

"The company (Adelin's company) was legal, in the sense that it had permission to operate there," he said.

But, the minister said, the prosecutors should have learned from previous experiences where cases were initially perceived and built as illegal logging cases but later found to be only administrative violations.

"There were 23 cases (identified as illegal logging) in Papua. But, all of the alleged perpetrators were eventually acquitted by the court there on the grounds they had only committed administrative violations," Kaban said.

"So, why are (the prosecutors) still using the same article (against Adelin)?" asked Kaban, adding two executives from Adelin's company had also been acquitted from all illegal logging charges.

But, Kaban said, those perpetrators could be charged with violating Law No. 41/1999 on Forestry if there were indications of environmental destruction within their concession areas.

"It is the duty of the (legal) apparatus to prove that," the minister said.

In this regard, he said, experts at the forestry ministry could assist the police and prosecutors in determining whether the forest had been destroyed or not.

However, Kaban said his ministry had never been consulted in such investigations.

A letter sent to Adelin's lawyer, according to Kaban, was just a regular letter, but it had been politicized.

"I sent a lot of other letters to other lawyers in response to their questions. Why weren't they questioned also?"

Chairman of the Indonesian Forest Conservation Cooperation Secretariat, Indro Cahyono, however, believes Kaban's letter was a kind of intervention.

He said if the minister wanted to provide information on the case, he could have simply appeared and testified as a witness in court.

"By doing so (writing the letter), it is likely he was intervening with court proceedings. That is a violation of the law and he can be prosecuted," Indro said.

Indro said Adelin likely had strong support from local legislators and executives.

"There is a strong indication ... his impunity indicates he also has strong support at the national level."

He added Adelin's case was only one small example of how illegal loggers could be so powerful.

"Illegal logging has become a corporate crime, infecting those with power in politics, the military and the police, as well as the judicial system," said Indro.

"As a result, they (illegal loggers) are never punished. Our investigation found that only 0.1 percent of all illegal logging suspects had been convicted by the court ... and all of them were eventually acquitted," he added.

Indra said illegal loggers allegedly financed candidates in the 2004 presidential election.

He declined to mention names, but said one of the logging companies that supported a

candidate in 2004 is now being investigated.