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About Us**Timber becomes a prime commodity after tsunami**

Six months after the tsunami, only a few survivors of Lampuuk could rebuild their houses, while the majority still live in cramped tents around the village mosque, the only structure that withstood the tsunami.

According to Syafrudin, a fisherman, even if they desperately want to rebuild their houses, the price of wood has gone so high since the tsunami that no one from their village can afford it.

Hundreds of thousands of internally displaced persons in Aceh still live in tents provided by international relief groups and non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

But roaming the city of Banda Aceh, one will see wood stores with fresh supplies of *sembarang* or construction wood. With logging becoming more rampant in Aceh, it is a wonder how wood became so expensive that it actually costs almost as twice as before.

According to an owner of a wood store in Lueng Bata in Banda Aceh, they are forced to sell their wood at a very high price to compensate for security taxes they have to pay to corrupt police officials.

"Even if we do not want to sell it a high price, we have no choice," said the owner who requested anonymity for fear of recrimination.

He said they are now selling their wood at an average price of Rp 2 million (US\$205) per cubic meter, from Rp 1.4 million per cubic meter before the tsunami.

They regularly make trips twice a week to districts in the central and eastern parts of Aceh to purchase wood directly from sawmill operators.

Wood coming from more distant places like the province of North Sumatra, Raui and Jambi are sold in Banda Aceh at a higher price of Rp 4 million per cubic meter to compensate for transportation as well as security taxes.

But even at a lower price, said the owner, still only few organizations and companies could really afford to buy wood from them.

According to his truck driver who regularly purchases processed wood from sawmills in the subdistrict of Langsa in Aceh Timur, he has to pass almost 70 checkpoints every trip. He has to pay almost Rp 200,000 to Rp 500,000 per checkpoint, amounting to almost Rp 15 million per trip.

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"If you do not give money, you will be kicked or hit in the head," said the driver.

"Sometimes they will hold your truck for very long hours to force you to give them money," said the driver's assistant.

Illegal taxes don't end at the stage of transporting woods.

"Everyday the police come here to ask for money," said the owner.

According to him, even if they have the necessary documents, they are still forced to give money to prevent trouble with authorities.

"I'm not surprised to hear that news," said Insp. Gen. Bachrumsyah Kasman, head of the police force in Aceh.

Bachrumsyah acknowledged that some of his men were engaged in bribery.

"We have 14,000 police, so I cannot control them one by one," he said.

"But I am doing everything to stop it," he further stressed.

"We want to help our fellow Acehnese," said the owner of the wood store. "But we also cannot lower our price," he said.

-- Riedo Panaligan

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