

## Indonesian official blames Illegal loggers for flood

BUKIT LAWANG, Indonesia (AP) — Indonesia's environment minister on Wednesday likened illegal loggers to "terrorists" for rampant deforestation, which he blamed for a devastating flood on Sumatra island. November 6, 2003

Illegal loggers blamed in Indonesian floods are "terrorists": environment minister



Indonesian soldiers search for victims in a house destroyed by the flood in the resort town in Bohorok, in North Sumatra province on Tuesday.

AFP

More than 200 people are either dead or missing after a flash flood on the western Indonesian island swept away scores of dwellings, many of which served as guesthouses for tourists visiting a famous orangutan reserve.

Rescuers with chain saws and bulldozers had pulled out 92 bodies by Wednesday from debris — mostly uprooted trees, logs, rocks and building materials — piled two stories high.

Families reported more than 150 people missing, the private Metro TV on Wednesday quoted village chief Yusmaidah as saying. Officials cautioned that some people who had left the area before the floods may appear on missing lists, inflating the figure.

Environmentalists say unchecked logging in Indonesia, a sprawling archipelago with 210 million inhabitants, disrupts the natural absorption and flow of rainwater from the highlands, triggering floods and landslides that sweep into the valleys.

Government officials admit that illegal tree cutting in Leuser Park may have blocked a waterway high in the mountains, causing a huge flash flood when the logs collapsed Sunday night in Bukit Lawang, North Sumatra.

"These illegal loggers are like terrorists," Environment Minister Nabel Makarim said at the presidential palace in Jakarta.

He said the environment ministry has given instructions to clear the protected forests of illegal loggers in Sumatra but "it's extremely difficult to prosecute them because we are dealing with corrupt officials and business people."

Also Wednesday, aid workers began distributing five tons of rice and hundreds of packets of instant noodles to survivors.

Most of the victims were villagers — many of them workers in the local tourism industry and their families. Five of the dead were foreigners — two Germans, two Austrians and a Singaporean.

"I am very lucky that I found my wife and three children. My neighbor has three relatives who disappeared," said M. Indra, the owner of a guesthouse.

Logging also has shrunk forests where endangered tigers, elephants and orangutans live. Sumatra has several national parks that are home to threatened animals.

Longgena Ginting, executive director of Walhi, Indonesia's largest environmental group, said that up to 20% of Leuser National Park, which overlooks Bukit Lawang, was deforested.

Bukit Lawang is surrounded by lush tropical rain forests. Upstream, however, in the national park, loggers and construction workers have cut away large swaths of the jungle while building a road into neighboring Aceh province.

On Wednesday, the Bahorok River was still raging through the village of 2,500 people.

Tourism has been the mainstay of Bukit Lawang since the orangutan reserve was established more than 20 years ago. The village was one of Sumatra's most visited tourist resorts.

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