

Killing of two Indonesian journalists points to criminality in palm oil industry

By Owen Howell
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The dead bodies of two Indonesian activists were discovered in late October on a palm plantation in the province of North Sumatra. According to police, the two men were allegedly murdered by a group of hired killers carrying out the orders of a local palm oil company owner.

Within a week of the discovery, police had arrested five suspects, including the company owner, *Kompas* reported. They are currently being detained at police headquarters in the provincial capital Medan, charged with murder. Three other suspects are still at large.

The two victims, Maraden Sianipar, 55, and Martua Siregar, 42, both worked as journalists for an online news portal, *Pindo Merdeka*, before going freelance in 2017. They then became renowned throughout the area for their activism in environmental issues and land disputes, in which they advocated for struggling peasants in their conflicts with company officials.

According to *Tribun Medan*, Wibharry Padmoasmolo, the owner of palm oil company KSU Amelia, allegedly commissioned the killings by hiring seven men—company employees and security guards—and paying four of them nearly \$US3,000. At a press conference, police commissioner Andi Rian said Wibharry told Janti Hutahaeen, the leader of the seven hired murderers: “Yes, just brush them off if there’s still someone annoying us. If you need to, finish them off.”

KSU Amelia claimed ownership of a vast plot of forest area and repeatedly expelled outraged farmers from the property, who felt the company had unlawfully taken control of their land. Last year the company’s concession was sealed off by government authorities after it cleared 750 hectares of rainforest to plant oil palms. It had been engaged in a fierce dispute with the impoverished farmers since 2015, after the

firm’s expansion onto forested land was ruled to be illegal.

Violent conflicts were common between the plantation’s guards and local people trying to access the land. In the end, the residents called upon environmental groups for assistance. At this point Maraden and Martua stepped in to act as mediators and attempt to resolve the dispute.

As the *Tribun* reported, the incident occurred on the afternoon of October 29 when Maraden and Martua visited the plantation to speak with company officials and discuss a solution. At the front gate they were allegedly met by seven men armed with bladed weapons called *kelewang*s. The hired men reportedly tortured the two activists to death, stabbing them multiple times.

Pos Metro Medan wrote that their bodies were found over the following two days on the KSU Amelia plantation in Labuhan Batu Regency, North Sumatra. Maraden’s body lay at the bottom of a ditch with his left arm hacked off and deep gashes around his head. Martua was found in the bushes near a warehouse, covered with stab wounds to his abdomen, back, and other body parts.

North Sumatra police chief Agus Andrianto related to the press that Wibharry denied owning the company when under police questioning, saying his father-in-law was one of the owners.

According to *Tempo*, police also explained that Joshua Situmorang, another top official at KSU Amelia, had once offered a wage of \$US1,000 to a security guard to kill Ranji Siallagan, the head of an association of palm smallholders, in an effort to silence opposition from local farmers to the company. Ranji survived the attack.

Less than a month before Maraden and Martua were

murdered, an environmental activist named Golfrid Siregar was found dead in suspicious circumstances. Golfrid was the attorney of the North Sumatran chapter of the Indonesian Forum for the Environment (WALHI), the nation's largest environmental group. He was involved in exposing illegal logging practices and provided legal guidance for local communities ensnared in conflicts with big companies.

Golfrid was found lying unconscious beside a motorcycle on a traffic overpass in Medan early on October 3 and died three days later. At the time police asserted that Golfrid died in a drink-driving accident. His work colleagues and relatives, however, according to an article by *Mongabay*, rejected this claim and argued instead that the evidence, including severe head injuries, indicated he was killed elsewhere and his body was dumped to conceal the crime.

The deaths of these activists have heightened concerns over the operations of palm oil companies among observers in Indonesia and internationally. Various civil society groups have noted that intimidation against those who investigate human rights abuses in the palm oil business is growing more violent.

Greenpeace campaigner Annisa Rahmawati, when asked about the two activists, told Reuters that the running of palm oil firms "was, and is, built upon the smeared blood and suffering of residents."

Plantation companies now employ soldiers and police as guards to stave off the infuriated rural masses from occupying their newly-acquired properties. Over the past decade certain firms in Sumatra and Borneo, where exploitative conditions are at their worst, have begun to hire the notorious paramilitary unit Brimob as a security force.

The highly lucrative international trade of palm oil, regarded as "the poor man's oil," is founded on the exploitation of cheap labour. Most plantation workers across Indonesia are casual daily labourers with no health insurance. Amnesty International reported in 2016 that companies used forced labour and child labour, and allowed dangerous working practices. The illegal burning of forests, moreover, which is responsible for the annual haze that blankets Southeast Asia, is a cheap method to clear land, with no consideration for the extreme ecological damage inflicted.

In a 2015 paper, the Centre for International Forestry Research documented the political corruption which propels the industry, concluding there was a link between land clearing and local elections. Regional elections regularly involve "land transactions," in which prospective regional leaders give residents access to land to attract their sympathies. Businessmen provide financial assistance to prospective regional heads, in return obtaining extra-judicial land permits when the candidate is elected.

The sudden rise in the practice of land grabbing during the Yudhoyono administration of 2004-2014 was the product of new government regulations making it easier for private companies to gain permits for land clearing. Over the past five years, the Widodo administration has likewise continued to make life easy for palm oil companies, turning a blind eye to the deep-rooted corruption and criminality that permeates the industry.

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