

Raid Against Sumatran Official Uncovers Use of Slave Labor on Oil Palm Farm

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A district head in Sumatra could face human trafficking charges after he was found to have imprisoned 48 men at his compound who worked for no pay at his oil palm plantation.

While police and other government authorities have been reluctant to declare this a case of modern-day slave labor, advocacy groups say the evidence against Terbit Rencana Perangin Angin, the head of Langkat district in North Sumatra province, is indisputable.

Terbit also faces charges of corruption (the raid on his compound was associated with a bribery allegation), and illegal wildlife possession (the raid also uncovered an orangutan and other protected species being kept as pets).

While the case has captured national attention, watchdog groups say the problem of labor violations in the palm oil industry are widespread, and have called for the swift passage of a bill to boost protections for workers.

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A sting by anti-corruption officers in Indonesia’s North Sumatra province has uncovered evidence that a powerful local official allegedly used slave labor on his oil palm plantation.

Agents from the KPK, Indonesia’s anti-corruption commission, found 48 men locked up in barred cells during a raid on Jan. 18 at the residential compound of **Terbit Rencana Perangin Angin**, the head of Langkat district. Police [said](#) at least one of the men was found to have bruises.

Terbit, who was wanted on separate allegations of bribery, was not at home during the sting, but surrendered to the authorities the next day. He denied allegations he was keeping the men in captivity to work without pay on his oil palm plantation.

But the evidence says otherwise, according to labor rights advocates.

Anis Hidayah, executive director of the migrant worker advocacy NGO Migrant Care, said the detainees were forced to work every day from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m., were only given two meals a day, and were subjected to physical assaults.

“These palm oil workers also reportedly do not receive wages at all and are not given proper meals,” she [said](#).

The detainees have since been released into the care of their families, while Migrant Care has filed a report against Terbit with the national human rights commission.



The detainees locked up in the barred cells of the house of Terbit Rencana Perangin Angin, the head of Langkat district in North Sumatra province. Image courtesy of Tiorita Rencana YouTube channel.

No pay, but extra pudding

In a [video](#) uploaded to his wife’s YouTube channel last year, Terbit claimed the men caged at his house were drug addicts being rehabilitated. (As a district head, or *bupati*, he has zero authority to detain anyone.)

Terbit, who is also one of the [richest](#) bupati in Indonesia, with declared assets of 85 billion rupiah (\$5.9 million), said he built the cells 10 years ago and that the men locked inside them had come voluntarily for rehab. He also said he employed some of them for his palm oil operations; the video showed some of the men unloading palm fruit from trucks and processing them in a mill.

One of the men, identifying himself as Terang, said in the video that he had passed a year in rehab and expressed thanks to Terbit “because I’ve recovered and am now employed.”

Another of the detainees, Jefri Sembiring, who spent four months locked up before being released following the KPK raid, said he felt his life had been getting back on track, [telling](#)

[local media](#) that “I was comfortable there.”

His wife, Hana, said she hoped the detention center wouldn’t be shut down because she wanted her husband to continue his recovery there.

Testimonies like these, according to police, make it difficult to conclude that the men were subjected to modern-day slavery.

“We see that their parents handed them over voluntarily, and they also consented [to being locked up],” **Ahmad Ramadhan**, a spokesman for the National Police, said at a Jan. 25 press conference. “Some of them are employed at the palm oil mill owned by the district head with the aim to provide them with skills that could be useful once they’re out of the rehabilitation place.”

Police also justified the lack of pay for the men’s labor, saying those who worked were rewarded with food. “They aren’t given wages as workers because they’re inmates,” Ahmad said. “But they’re given extra pudding and food.”

‘Exploit the victims’

Image on the right: Terbit Rencana Perangin Angin, the head of Langkat district in North Sumatra province.



The police’s ambivalence about treating the case as one of slavery chimes with the reluctance of other government agencies to strongly condemn Terbit’s actions.

The National Narcotics Agency (BNN), which oversees rehab centers across Indonesia, confirmed that the facility at Terbit’s compound [wasn’t a licensed rehab center](#). Yet while the BNN’s district office inspected it in 2017, it didn’t shut down the site at the time, for reasons that are still unknown.

The national rights commission, meanwhile, has cautioned against declaring the case one of slavery.

“We want to see the bigger picture, whether it’s true there was a modern slavery here or whether it was just a rehabilitation center being run in the traditional manner,” [said Choirul Anam](#), a member of the commission. He suggested it could plausibly be a

rehab center if the detainees had access to medical care.

But legal experts outside the Indonesian government say there's no question this is a case of slave labor.

"The goal was to exploit the victims," [said Ninik Rahayu](#), a legal expert and former national ombudsperson. "The victims didn't have any other choice. Their labor was used. So this is slavery."

She said Terbit exploited the drug addicts' vulnerable position, making this a case of "human slavery," for which the district head should be charged with human trafficking.

Maidina Rahmawati, a researcher at the Institute for Criminal Justice Reform (ICJR), [agreed](#), saying the fundamental facts — that the men were deprived of their freedom and not paid for their labor — pointed to a clear case of exploitation.

She added the positive testimonies given by some of the men and their family members may have been coerced from them under intimidation.

Following the raid, the BNN carried out drug tests on 11 of the 48 inmates and all 11 [tested](#) negative, while the rest refused to be tested.

Widespread labor violations

Sawit Watch, an NGO that tracks violations in the palm oil industry, says the case in Langkat is just the tip of the iceberg in an industry where labor violations are widespread.

"This is because lack of monitoring," Sawit Watch executive director Achmad Surambo told Mongabay. "The number of labor inspectors in the plantation industry is very small."

In 2012, Sawit Watch uncovered a case in which people were trafficked from Sumatra to work on plantations in Borneo. They were kept locked up in a house, and only released in the morning to work.

"In the evening, they went back to the house and the door was locked," Achmad said. "This was allowed to happen because of lack of monitoring, especially in a remote area [like this]."

Some 7 million Indonesians are employed in the palm oil industry, according to official [data](#), of whom 70% work without contract and with little to no protection.

"What we want is humane working conditions," Achmad said, pointing to legislation currently in parliament that would help improve protections for palm oil workers.

The bill is in the docket of priority legislation for passage, but progress has been sluggish. The Langkat case, and the public outcry that it has elicited, should be a wake-up call to spur parliament into passing the bill swiftly, Achmad said.

"I think this issue should be discussed in the public so that this kind of case doesn't happen again," he said. "What's happening in Langkat is very degrading to people, where their freedom is taken away from them. That used to only happen in the past, so

why are we still finding it in modern times?"



Trucks carrying palm oil fruit bunches from Terbit Rencana Perangin Angin's plantation in Langkat, North Sumatra. Image courtesy of Tiorita Rencana YouTube channel.

Illegal wildlife possession

For Terbit, the troubles are just beginning. Besides the corruption charges that have already been pressed against him by the KPK, for which he could be jailed for five years, he also faces possible charges of human trafficking (up to 15 years) and illegal wildlife possession (seven years).

During the KPK raid on Terbit's compound, officers found seven threatened animals, all protected under Indonesia's conservation act and therefore illegal to keep in captivity.

The North Sumatra provincial conservation agency, or BBKSDA, confiscated the animals on Jan. 25 and moved them to wildlife rescue and rehabilitation facilities. They include a Sumatran orangutan (*Pongo abelii*), a black-crested macaque (*Cynopithecus niger*) and two Bali starlings (*Leucopsar rothschildi*), all listed as critically endangered, as well as a crested hawk-eagle (*Nisaetus cirrhatus*) and two common hill mynas (*Gracula religiosa*).

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Featured image: Terbit Rencana Perangin Angin, the head of Langkat district in North Sumatra province, standing outside the barred cells where his palm oil workers are being locked up in. Image courtesy of Tiorita Rencana YouTube channel.

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