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Forest Loss in Sumatra Becomes a Global Issue

By PETER GELLING

KUALA CENAKU, Indonesia, Dec. 1 — Here on the island of Sumatra, about 1,200 miles from the global climate talks under way on Bali, are some of the world's fastest-disappearing forests.

A look at this vast wasteland of charred stumps and dried-out peat makes the fight to save Indonesia's forests seem nearly impossible.

"What can we possibly do to stop this?" said Pak Helman, 28, a villager here in Riau Province, surveying the scene from his leaking wooden longboat. "I feel lost. I feel abandoned."

In recent years, dozens of pulp and paper companies have descended on Riau, which is roughly the size of Switzerland, snatching up generous government concessions to log and establish palm oil plantations. The results have caused villagers to feel panic.

Only five years ago, Mr. Helman said, he earned nearly \$100 a week catching shrimp. Now, he said, logging has poisoned the rivers snaking through the heart of Riau, and he is lucky to find enough shrimp to earn \$5 a month.

Responding to global demand for palm oil, which is used in cooking and cosmetics and, lately, in an increasingly popular biodiesel, companies have been claiming any land they can.

Fortunately, from Mr. Helman's point of view, the issue of Riau's disappearing forests has become a global one. He is now a volunteer for Greenpeace, which has established a camp in his village to monitor what it calls an impending Indonesian "carbon bomb."

Deforestation, during which carbon stored in trees is released into the atmosphere, now accounts for 20 percent of the world's greenhouse gas emissions, according to scientists. And Indonesia releases more carbon dioxide through deforestation than any other country.

Within Indonesia, the situation is most critical in Riau. In the past 10 years, nearly 60 percent of the province's forests have been logged, burned and pulped, according to Jikalahari, a local environmental group.

"This is very serious — the world needs to act now," said Susanto Kurniawan, a coordinator for Jikalahari who regularly makes the arduous trip into the forest from the nearby city of Pekanbaru, passing long lines of trucks carting palm oil and wood. "In a few years it will be too late."

The rate of this deforestation is rising as oil prices reach new highs, leading more industries to turn to biodiesel made from palm oil, which, in theory, is earth-friendly. But its use is causing more harm than good, environmental groups say, because companies slash and burn huge swaths of trees to make way for palm oil plantations.

Even more significant, the burning and drying of Riau's carbon-rich peatlands, also to make way for palm oil plantations, releases about 1.8 billion tons of greenhouse gases a year, according to Greenpeace officials.

But it is also in Riau that a new global strategy for conserving forests in developing countries might begin. A small area of Riau's remaining forest will become a test case if an international carbon-trading plan called REDD is adopted.

REDD, or Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation, is to be one of the central topics of discussion at the Bali conference. Essentially, it would involve pay-



A burned stump from a once dense forest stands in a field being cleared for a palm oil plantation in Sumber, Indonesia.

ments by wealthy countries to developing countries for every hectare of forest they do not cut down.

Indonesia, caught between its own financial interest in the palm oil industry and the growing international demands for conservation, has been promoting the carbon-trading plan for months.

But there are plenty of skeptics, who doubt it will be possible to measure just how much carbon is being conserved — and who question whether the lands involved can be protected from illegal logging and corruption.

Illegal logging is commonplace in Indonesia, and though the government has prosecuted dozens of cases in recent years, it says it cannot be everywhere. Companies in this remote area are cultivating land legally sold to them by the Indonesian government, but maps of their projects obtained by Greenpeace indicate that many of them have also moved into protected areas.

Critics say corruption is their biggest concern. The most famous illegal logger in Indonesia, Adelin Lis, who operated in North Sumatra, was arrested this year, only to be acquitted by a court in Medan, the provincial capital. He then left the country.

The attorney general's office has opened a corruption investigation into judges and the police in Medan, and says there are many similar cases. "There are a number of ongoing investigations into corruption that has allowed illegal loggers from all over Indonesia to go free," said Thomson Siagian, a spokesman for the attorney general. "In such a lucrative industry, payoffs are common."

At the Bali conference, the Woods Hole Research Center, an environmental group based in the United States, has presented research showing that new satellite technology can make it more feasible to track illegal logging. Reports "show that radar imagery from new sensors recently placed in orbit can solve the problem of monitoring reductions in tropical deforestation, which previously was a major obstacle because of cloud cover that optical sensors can't see through," said John P. Holdren, the center's director.

Such developments are good news to Mr. Helman, the villager in Riau who, using his wooden boat, has been ferrying a steady stream of foreign environmentalists and journalists in and out of the forest in recent weeks.

"I am so thankful for the recent attention," he said, tinkering with the sputtering engine. "At times it seems too late. But I see some hope now."