

Death threats not a deterrence in mission to save Indonesia forests

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JAKARTA (CNA) – Professor Bambang Hero Saharjo had just arrived at a court in Indonesia to testify as an expert witness in an environmental crime case when he received a phone call.

The unknown caller tried to intimidate him and Professor Saharjo immediately ended the call. He then switched off his phone.

This was just one of the many incidents where the 55-year-old Indonesian scientist received intimidation and even death threats for testifying in environmental cases, particularly those related to forest and land fire, forest encroachment and illegal logging.

“Because in environmental cases, the key is in the expert witness,” he told *CNA*.

Indonesia is no stranger to forest and land fires which authorities blame on culprits who purposely set fires to clear land. Most of the time, these fires are worsened by dry weather. The massive fires, which happen almost every year, have caused deaths and economic loss, while setting back efforts to combat climate change.

A key element to stop the fires is tough law enforcement but since it is not easy to prove who the culprits are, an expert witness plays a critical role when a defendant is tried in court.

As a forest protection lecturer at IPB University, an agricultural university in Bogor, Professor Saharjo holds fast to his belief that his profession requires him to teach and conduct research as well as to serve the public.



Professor Bambang Hero Saharjo has been an expert witness in about 600 environmental crime cases since 2000



A firefighter inspects a bush fire in Ogan Ilir regency, South Sumatra. PHOTOS: CNA



A forest fire brigade member tries to extinguish peatland fires at a palm plantation in Pekanbaru, Riau province, Indonesia

It is the latter that has led him to become an expert witness by using scientific evidence in about 600 court cases, but the job does not come without consequences.

He sometimes receives messages from random people and has strangers looking for him at his university.

There were also a few times when his family had to seek refuge because someone threatened their safety.

He declined to go into more details about the threats that he had faced.

In 2018, a palm oil company even tried to sue him after it was being convicted of causing fires.

“They sued me for IDR510 billion (USD35 million) and asked me to withdraw all my testimonies hoping that when they are withdrawn, there will be no more charges against them.

“But eventually in the second trial, the corporation withdrew the lawsuit,” he said.

Despite the obstacles, Professor Saharjo soldiered on and has flown to various parts of Sumatra, Java, Kalimantan and Sulawesi to testify for the last 20 years.

“I apply science for the interest of the public. I go to the field, conduct training and testify as an expert witness in (court) cases related to environmental damage,” Professor Saharjo said.

Every day, Professor Saharjo observes images from a dedicated dashboard at the Regional Fire Management Resource Centre – South East Asia at the university.

It uses three different satellites and shows images from the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) and the European Space Agency.

The technology can detect hotspots, fire spots, and well as the source and direction of wind and haze in Southeast Asia.

It is the only one in the region and can even track past data.

Professor Saharjo sends the information regularly to agencies responsible for preventing and mitigating forest fires such as the Ministry of Environment and Forestry and the disaster agency.

“For example, recently there was a big fire in West Kalimantan. We told the local authorities that the fires were approaching a certain place, please act quickly because the fires were on peatland,” he said.

Sometimes Professor Saharjo goes to the ground to investigate cases by drilling the peatland if there are requests from the police, the government and universities.

“Every step I take is not that different from regular research. From determining the location, the case, the samples, the method and where to analyse it ... so it becomes one chain which is hard to dispute,” he explained.

For his work, Professor Saharjo won the John Maddox Prize, an award for researchers who show great courage in standing up for science and scientific reasoning despite hostility, in London last November.

He was among 200 nominees.

He also received the Global Landscape Fire Award from Germany’s University of Freiburg last September for his commitment in forest protection.

As Indonesia is about to enter the peak of the dry season, which usually increases the likelihood of land and forest fires, Professor Saharjo is extra vigilant.

“The government has agreed to control fires as soon as possible. So operations like weather modification and video call meetings with all the local governments have been conducted.

“But it’s like having 10 children and not everyone turns out well ... and the Environment and Forestry Ministry’s directorate general of law enforcement is chasing after cases not only involving domestic investors but also the ones from neighbouring countries,” Professor Saharjo said.

When dealing with court cases, there are many challenges he needs to tackle. For instance, suspects will always try to defend themselves by coming up with excuses.

Some argued that the burnt land is not “damaged” because grass still grows on it, Professor Saharjo told CNA.

“But has it ever crossed their mind that the burnt peatland takes dozens if not hundreds of years to be restored?”

“Also, during the fires, greenhouse gas emissions are released ... so that’s not correct.”

In 2015, Indonesia had to deal with the biggest fires in almost 20 years which burned about 2.6 million hectares of land. Professor Saharjo and his team worked together with an American university funded by NASA to examine the peatland fires.

They used a special detector imported from the United States to take samples of the burnt peatland in Central Kalimantan province.

There was only one of it in the entire world, he said, and it has even been used on Mars.

“For the first time in the world, the samples we took showed that there were 90 gas types in the smoke. This was published in an international journal in 2016.

“Unfortunately, more than 50 types of gas in there were toxic,” Professor Saharjo said.

“This means, the longer we let fires burn, the duration of people being exposed to toxic chemicals is longer and this is a threat to people’s health.

“This is why we need to prevent them from happening,” he explained.

Professor Saharjo’s dedication in protecting forests started more than 35 years ago when he was still in high school.

Between 1982 and 1983, a big fire happened on the eastern side of Kalimantan which burned 3.6 million hectares of forests.

It triggered his curiosity and he wanted to know the cause and the solution.

He subsequently enrolled at the IPB University majoring in forest protection and continued to pursue his master’s degree and doctorate in Japan.

Upon returning from his studies in Japan in 2000, a director from the environment ministry who knew about his qualifications contacted him.

The director asked him whether he was interested in helping them with a land and forest fire case in Riau and West Kalimantan.

He agreed, they won the case, and it marked the journey of his battle to save the environment.

Although land and forest fires have existed for decades – including in Jambi province where Professor Saharjo grew up – he has seen a shift in the motive of starting fires in recent years.

“Back then, people did not know about insurance claims ... but lately, there are cases where people set fires to file claims, the value of which reach dozens of billions (of rupiah). I have handled such cases carried out by oil palm and also pulp and paper companies,” he said. There were also cases where businesses cleared land parcels to be sold in order to fetch a higher price.

“And they don’t operate alone. There are usually mafias involved,” he claimed.

As the challenges grew bigger, some asked Professor Saharjo why he carried on with what he was doing. “Some colleagues say: ‘Why do you even bother (testifying in court)? It’s better to be like me, help out a company and receive a certain percentage.’”

Professor Saharjo recalled one particular news story during the 2015 land and forest fires that moved him greatly and motivated him to keep going until today.

In the TV news, a man in Riau was hugging his son who died due to the fires.

“The boy was just in his third year of high school and he died because he ran out of oxygen.

“The father asked: ‘Who is now responsible for this? We are not the perpetrators but we become the victims,’” he recalled.

Professor Saharjo said, “In my view, if we do not become part of the solution, then (the environmental crimes) will continue.”

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