

Apriadi Gunawan, The Jakarta Post, Medan / Wed, 03/02/2011 11:04 AM / The Archipelago

Bukit Barisan Military Commander Maj. Gen. Leo J.P. Siegers has ordered his men to arrest forest encroachers who have been operating in the Bukit Barisan protected forest in

North Sumatra.

Siegers said the Indonesian Military (TNI) was concerned by forest encroachment, which was growing further out of control in northern parts of North Sumatra.

“Forest encroachment in North Sumatra is becoming rampant. I have ordered my soldiers to apprehend the perpetrators,” Siegers said.

Siegers’ remarks came after seeing off the Bukit Barisan Military Command expedition team at the Air Force airbase in Medan on Tuesday.

The 59-strong expedition team is made up of 34 Army Special Forces members, 14 Army Strategic Command members, one from the Army Topography division, six students, four Wanadri mountain climbers, three Padjadjaran University students and one Bandung Institute of Technology student.

The team will embark on the expedition in the Sinabung mountainous region in Karo regency, North Sumatra, for six months.

On the expedition, they will gather data and explore geological resources, social and cultural dynamics, flora and fauna and illegal logging practices in the area.

Siegers said the numerous cases of illegal logging thus far were due to lax law enforcement.

He added that, had law enforcers been comprehensive and cohesive in stamping out illegal loggers, the illegal logging would not take place.

Siegers offered help from his forces to participate in securing the forest from illegal encroachment.

“The TNI is ready to secure the forest, together with the police and other law enforcers. If we’re solid, we could root out all the encroachers,” Siegers said.

North Sumatra Forestry Office head James Budiman Siringo-Ringo warmly welcomed the help from the TNI and regarded it as a positive step in upholding the law in forested areas in North Sumatra.

James said his office had been coordinating with the police in dealing with illegal logging.

“We have always worked with the police to stop forest encroachment. If the police are overwhelmed, then the TNI will be involved,” said James on Tuesday.

James acknowledged that illegal logging was still taking place in a number of areas in North Sumatra.

He added that, in general, illegal logging was carried out to clear land for oil palm plantations.

“Many forested areas have been cleared and converted into oil palm plantations, as is evident in South Tapanuli and Labuhan Batu regencies,” said James.

When asked about the level of forest encroachment in North Sumatra, James said cases of forest encroachment in protected forests in the province had lately decreased compared to a few years ago.

“Forest encroachment has decreased thanks to legal actions,” said James, though he did not elaborate on the specifics of those legal actions.