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Indonesia has been the world's largest exporter of seaborne thermal coal since 2005, enjoying the advantages of low production costs as most of its estimated 95 billion tons of reserves allow for open-cast mining, its coals produce low emission of sulphur, and the country is geographically part of Asia, the world's coal largest market.

However, this coal-mining boom seemed to have inflicted severe damages to our forests due to reckless issuance of mining rights by regional administrations and weak enforcement of the forestry, environmental, spatial and mining laws.

Last Wednesday's discovery by a central government team of extensive forest damages inflicted by coal mining operations in Kalimantan only confirmed our fear of the excesses of the launching of the regional autonomy in 2001.

The regional autonomy devolved the authority of licensing general mining operations (outside oil and natural gas) to regional administrations which is further reaffirmed by the 2009 mining law. But this has made mining as the second biggest destroyer of forests, in addition to illegal logging and slash-and-burn farming.

The team of Forestry Minister Zulkifli Hasan, Environment Minister Gusti Muhammad Hatta and members of the President's anti-judicial mafia taskforce observed during its aerial survey of East Kalimantan that hundreds of thousands of forested areas have been damaged by greedy legal and illegal miners.

The team saw from the air hundreds of huge black holes abandoned by open-pit coal miners. These holes are supposed to be reclaimed with reforestation by the mining concessionaires.

We find it mind-boggling to understand why the government had not anticipated such

environmental damages because mining operations not only are complex but also transcend the jurisdictions of many other ministries — beside the mining and energy ministries — such as the ministries forestry, environment and health.

Mining has been playing an important role in the country's economy as the country holds major deposits of oil, gas, copper, gold, nickel, coal, silver, diamonds and base metals.

But the central government should have regulated how the various ministries and the different levels of government execute their respective functions and responsibilities as regards mining operations and the supervision of environmental, health and safety aspects as well the rights of the local people around mining areas.

But what the team learnt at a meeting with East Kalimantan Governor Awang Faroek in Samarinda was an acute lack of apprehension of the division of authorities between provincial and regency administrations with regards to the awarding of coal mining rights.

Governor Faroek, instead of accepting responsibility for the weak supervision of coal mining operations in his province, asked for special authority from the central government to enable him to order regents to rein on coal mining rights.

One of the main problem, we think, lies in the long delay in the enforcement of the 2009 mining law that already clearly regulates the division of authority in the licensing of mining ventures between the central government and provincial and regency administrations, the delineation of areas opened to mining contractors or reserved for strategic mining area under direct jurisdiction of the central government.

But we cannot understand why the government has yet to issue all regulations needed to implement the mining law more than one year after its enactment.

Without sweeping realignment in the issuance of mining licenses/rights and strong enforcement of the new mining law, as well as the forestry and environmental laws, Indonesia's two-year moratorium on clearing natural forests President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono declared

at a climate-change conference in Oslo

late last month could become a joke.