

11 February 2021

Indonesia: Environmental rights defenders Samsir and Syamsul Bahri arrested

On 10 February 2021, environmental rights defenders **Samsir** and **Syamsul Bahri** were arrested by the Tanjung Pura Police for their alleged involvement in the physical assault of an individual on 18 December 2020. Both defenders are currently being held at the Langkat Police detention centre in Stabat.

[Samsir](#) and [Syamsul Bahri](#) are environmental rights defenders and chairpersons of the Tani Nipah Group. The group works on the restoration and rehabilitation of the natural environment, by planting Rizophora and Nipah mangroves, and opening up water channels to better irrigate areas habited by the local communities. As environmental rights defenders, both have been actively involved in the preservation of the local environment and the fight against exploitation of the area.

On 10 February 2021, the Tanjung Pura Police called in Samsir and Syamsul Bahri to record their statements in relation to their alleged involvement in an incident of assault that took place on 18 December 2020. Later the same day, an arrest warrant was issued against the two defenders charging them under Article 170 of the penal code with ‘committing violence against persons or property’, in conjunction with Articles 55 and 56 of the Indonesian Penal Code which concerns ‘giving order/influence to a crime’ and ‘assisting to commit a crime’. Following the issuing of the warrant, Samsir and Syamsul Bahri were arrested at the police station and sent to the Langkat Police detention centre for 20 days. The Tani Nipah Group believes that the case against the defenders has been fabricated as a form of intimidation for their environmental protection work.

On 18 December 2020, the complainant in the assault case, along with another person, both of whom are believed to be affiliated to a palm oil company, approached and photographed the Tani Nipah Group while they were planting mangroves and cleaning up the areas managed by the community. Noticing the outsiders, Syamsul Bahri approached them and asked why they were documenting of the group’s work. The environmental rights defender was reportedly met with arrogant responses from the complainant. The commotion attracted other members of the Tani Nipah Group group to the scene, prompting the complainant to walk away. The complainant was then overheard informing an unknown individual on a call that he had been assaulted. After making the call, the complainant jumped into the nearby river. For fear that he might drown, members of the group immediately took a boat out to save him. They then questioned the complainants claim that he had been attacked, after which the complainant immediately retracted his statement. The Tani Nipah Group has a video of the complainant retracting the assault accusation.

The palm oil company that the complainant is believed to be affiliated with owns 65 hectares of land in the region. It is suspected that the company also has illegal palm oil plantations in the area. The Tani Nipah group and environmental defenders believe that the intimidation is being directed by the company because of the group’s work in protecting the mangrove forest environment.

Samsir and Syamsul Bahri and the Tani Nipah group have been the target of threats and harassment in the past for their environmental protection work. In 2016, Syamsul Bahri was shot by an unknown individual just after he started working with the Tani Nipah Group. In 2017, Syamsul Bahri and his wife were hit and badly injured by an unknown motorcyclist. On several occasions, trees planted by the Tani Nipah Group group have been cut down. While formal complaints have been registered with the police, no action has been taken to find perpetrators of the aforementioned harassments.

Front Line Defenders is deeply concerned by the progressively hostile environment for human

rights defenders in Indonesia. Front Line Defenders condemns the arrest of Samsir and Syamsul Bahri, and the targeting of the Tani Nipah Group, as it believes they are being targeted for their legitimate and peaceful work in defence of environmental rights.

Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in Indonesia to:

1. Immediately and unconditionally release Samsir and Syamsul Bahri, as Front Line Defenders believes that they are being targeted solely as a result of their legitimate and peaceful work in the defence of environmental rights;
2. Ensure that the treatment of Samsir and Syamsul Bahri, while in detention, adheres to the conditions set out in the 'Body of Principles for the Protection of All Persons under Any Form of Detention or Imprisonment', adopted by UN General Assembly resolution 43/173 of 9 December 1988;
3. Guarantee in all circumstances that all human rights defenders in Indonesia are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals, and free of all restrictions including police and judicial harassment.

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