

IN BRIEF: POLITICAL

for police to charge people for financial crimes they commit when attempting to hide profits from illegal logging.

Ironically, this is something the North Sumatra Police have already attempted in Lis' case. Just days after he was released, the police announced they had declared him a suspect for new offences relating to money laundering.

This would be a heartening development except for one thing—Lis has gone missing again. While police had been busy preparing a new set of charges, they forgot to pass this information to the judges who had released him from custody and ordered his “good name” to be restored. Lis has not been seen since.

Driving the locomotive

A nation's law enforcers, such as the police and public prosecutors, are supposed to protect its citizens. But in a country where police brutality and graft is common, rather than expecting protection *by* the law, Indonesia's citizens often need protection *from* it.

Under such circumstances, organisations like the Indonesian Legal Aid Foundation (YLBHI) are essential. However, in recent years the foundation's good work has been threatened by internal feuds, the latest of which came to the surface in early November.

Formed in 1969, the YLBHI earned its nickname, the “locomotive of democracy,” from decades of defending ordinary people's rights under the authoritarian Soeharto regime. To this day, the body continues to advocate against government policies considered to disadvantage the poor. But the foundation's uniqueness lies in the concrete help it provides to individuals.

This is no light work, and it is estimated that the dozens of professional lawyers and law students grouped in the YLBHI handle around 2500 pro-bono cases a year. Their legal locomotive also chugs along on the minimum of fuel—donations to the organisation are small and so are annual operating budgets. Despite the limitations, the organisation is a national one—boasting 22 branches from Aceh to Papua.

Put a bunch of stropy lawyers together on low pay, and united only by a shared sense of idealism and you are bound to have some differences. Especially, when a former galvaniser—the single enemy of the Soeharto regime—has dissolved. While it was not immune to internal rifts during the New Order, this might explain why the YLBHI has seen its most acrimonious disputes occur in recent years.

Munir, the celebrated human rights activist who was assassinated in 2004, highlighted one such feud when he quit the foundation in 2002. Munir's resignation was in protest at the decision of a YLBHI founder and board member, Adnan Buyung Nasution, to defend military and police officers accused of human rights violations.

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Another serious schism erupted in 2006, when chairman Munarman was forced to resign, prompting a mass walkout by his supporters. This time the issue concerned Munarman's alleged preference for defending Muslim activists, some of which were considered to be from the radical fringes of the religion. In his defence, Munarman claimed that he was pushed out by his seniors because he refused to accept donations from Jakarta Governor Sutiyoso and politically well-connected businessman Tommy Winata.

The latest problems have seen 19 members resign from the organisation, leaving it desperately understaffed. Again the problems are with the leadership, in the form of current YLBHI chairman, Patra Zen.

Zen told the *Report* his plans to restructure staff and increase budget transparency were at the root of the walkout. "I want to promote reform, but my colleagues are not happy with this because they have long enjoyed a certain 'comfort zone'," he said.

"Many of them are no longer acting professionally. The poor who come to our office deserve proper legal aid. If we fail to protect them, then who will do it?" he added.

Other sources within the NGO community told the *Report* that efforts to increase the budget transparency within YLBHI were long overdue. As NGOs have mushroomed in the post-Soeharto period, the organisation has found it increasingly hard to maintain its level of funding.

While some of the current board members, such as Todung Mulya Lubis and Adnan Buyung Nasution, have gone from being pro-bono lawyers to earning top dollar in their professions, the current YLBHI head earns a salary of just Rp 4 million (US\$435) per month.

With help from the Jakarta administration and private donors, YLBHI is set to go up in the world, moving to better lodgings in early 2008. However, some sources allege that without a corresponding increase in budget transparency, these new premises are vulnerable to misuse.

As one of Indonesia's oldest NGOs, the periodic problems the YLBHI experiences should be expected as a natural part of its development and renewal. But as donor's expectations increase, administrative reform will become as important as ideological regeneration. One must hope, for the sake of those it serves, that the YLBHI can overcome this latest round of difficulties. □