

Although reports of famine plaguing seven subdistricts of Yahukimo, Papua, have been an annual occurrence, researchers insisted on Tuesday that the residents had never experienced a food shortage.

Viktor Mambor, a lead researcher for the report, titled “Famine Disaster and Life in Yakuimo: No Sweet Potato!”, said that although residents often ran out of rice, they had never suffered a food shortage.

The locals, he said, did not consider themselves in a state of famine until their supply bags known as noken — filled with sweet potato, medicine, firestone and poison for their weapons — were empty.

Viktor’s research was conducted in four of the subdistricts said to be suffering shortages.

“The government or media’s definition [of famine] is that there is no rice to eat, but [residents] still have vegetables, fruits and sweet potatoes,” Viktor said.

Even though the supply of sweet potatoes hasn’t been depleted, Victor added, the locals have “difficulties harvesting their sweet potatoes from May to October every year.”

The Asian Human Rights Commission had earlier reported that famine had clearly struck the city’s subdistricts — Suntamon, Langda, Bomela, Seradala, Walma, Pronggoli and Heryakpini — over the first nine months of the year, killing at least 113 people.

Aburizal Bakrie, former coordinating minister for people’s welfare, had denied the famine and the reported deaths. However, the regional government, acting on its own, provided 3.3 tons of rice to relieve what it believed to be a famine in November.

Meanwhile, Amiruddin Al Rahab, a senior researcher of the Institute for Policy Research and Advocacy (Elsam), said the issue was not about the definition of famine but the fact that the government had failed to provide assistance for its own people.

“The report is clearly stating that the food shortage is an annual event in which the local people would eventually have to deal with the hunger issue because of crop failure. So what has the government been doing [to prevent this]?” he said. “I clearly state that this is famine because that’s the only way that we can push the government to make better policies.”

Chalid Muhammad, head of the Indonesian Green Institute, criticized the local administration.

“The investment approach that has been applied [by the government in] Papua is not working at all and has never proven to increase the welfare of their residents,” Chalid said.