

Residents of Teluk Meranti in Riau are seeking the expulsion of forestry industry companies operating in the district, claiming the companies have brought nothing but misery.

“We want our forests back,” Yusuf, a chief of the Paliang tribe, an indigenous ethnic group in Teluk Meranti district, said in Jakarta on Friday.

“My only mandate from local villagers is to convey their strong objections to the presence of these companies to the central government,” he said, after being told at the last minute that his scheduled meeting with Forestry Minister Zulkifli Hasan had been canceled.

Located on the Kampar peninsula, Teluk Meranti has been in the media spotlight since October, when the environmental group Greenpeace established a site called the Climate Defenders Camp to protest against deforestation in the district by major forestry companies, including Asia Pulp and Paper and Asia Pacific Resources International Holdings Limited (APRIL).

Greenpeace activists staged two demonstrations in the area, which led to the deportation of 11 foreign activists and the arrest of 21 Indonesians.

The activists’ actions included chaining themselves to excavators owned by APRIL, which has been granted a huge concession covering most of Kampar peninsula’s 400,000 hectares, and to cranes owned by PT Indah Kiat Pulp and Paper, a subsidiary of the Sinar Mas Group, at Perawang Port in Siak district.

Yusuf said villagers had struggled to earn a living since the companies arrived in the area.

“It’s very hard for us farmers to make a living because there have been lots of disturbances since PT Arara Abadi started its operations in 1997,” he said.

“Tigers have been roaming around our village because there are no more intact forests,” Yusuf said.

He added that more companies operating in the district would only mean more suffering for local residents.

Bustar Maitar, the Greenpeace Indonesia campaign manager for Southeast Asia, said the organization’s campaigns in Kampar were a warning to the government to make sure that the same kind of destruction that has occurred in Riau would not be repeated in Papua, which has the only intact forest left in the country.

“Almost 80 percent of greenhouse gas emissions in the country are coming from deforestation, with about 1.8 billion tons of carbon emitted by the opening up of peatlands,” Bustar said.

“So, if the government really is committed to its international pledge on emissions cuts, it will need to stop all expansion into peatlands because they are releasing the most carbon dioxide [into the atmosphere].”