

Churches in Indonesia call for closure of environmentally harmful pulp mill

“The earth belongs to God – and everything that lives in it.”

(Wuppertal / Pematangsiantar, May 19, 2025) – At a joint conference entitled “Strengthening the Churches' Commitment in Maintaining the Integrity of Creation and Social Justice,” leading church representatives from North Sumatra (Indonesia) spoke out clearly against the PT Toba Pulp Lestari (PT TPL) pulp mill. The conference was organized by the United Evangelical Mission (UEM) in cooperation with the Communion of Churches in Indonesia (PGI) at the Nommensen University of the HKBP Church (Huria Kristen Batak Protestan).

Ten senior representatives of various churches and the North Sumatra Institute discussed the serious environmental impacts of industrial deforestation by PT TPL in the region of the Batak ethnic group living there. In a joint statement, the church leaders emphasized that PT TPL's business practices are not compatible with President Prabowo's government program, which pursues a sustainable “green economic policy” based on local knowledge.

The occasion was a public statement by HKBP church leader Ephorus Dr. Victor Tinambunan on May 7, 2025, in which he called for the immediate closure of the company. While the demand received broad support among the population, it met with significant resistance from the company. The initiative was accompanied by numerous social and church actions, such as the “Caring for Nature” church service, which was held in many places in North Sumatra and mobilized thousands of believers.

Four central demands of UEM

UEM expressly supports this demand. In a video message, UEM's General Secretary Rev. Dr. Andar Parlindungan stated: “We reaffirm our unconditional support for the call to close PT TPL, a company that has been causing profound environmental and social damage for decades. Our commitment is an expression of our solidarity and our mission to promote justice and preserve the integrity of creation.”

In its statement, UEM formulates four central demands:

1. The Indonesian government is called upon to take the voices of the affected population and the churches seriously.
2. PT TPL must immediately and permanently cease its activities in the Batak region.
3. The affected employees of the company must be fairly compensated and given comprehensive support in finding new jobs.

4. Churches worldwide are called upon to raise their prophetic voice for the protection of life and the preservation of creation.

Long-standing commitment to justice and the integrity of creation

Pastor Parlindungan points out that UEM's position has a clear historical continuity: since the 1990s, under the leadership of Dr. S.A.E. Nababan, then Ephorus of the HKBP and Moderator of UEM, it has stood alongside local communities in their resistance to the environmentally damaging business activities of the former predecessor company PT Indorayon. This long-standing commitment is deeply rooted in the Christian mission of UEM: to promote justice, strengthen community, and preserve the integrity of creation.

Church and political engagement

For UEM, this position is an expression of the church's prophetic and political responsibility. According to Parlindungan, it is not a matter of exerting political influence for the sake of power, but of establishing God's just and peaceful order. The church is therefore called upon to take a public and political stand—as a voice for divine justice and the protection of all life. The churches in North Sumatra, for example, are calling for a fundamental rethink with the confession from Psalm 24:1, “The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it.” They are thus sending a clear signal for ecological justice and sustainable action, which should shine far beyond the region as a beacon of hope and resistance against environmental destruction.

Keyword “UEM”

The United Evangelical Mission (UEM) with offices in Wuppertal, Indonesia, and Tanzania is an international, equal community of 39 members, including 32 Protestant churches in Africa and Asia, six German EKD churches, and the von Bodelschwingh Stiftungen Bethel. The UEM consistently pursues a holistic understanding of mission. This includes improving the living conditions of people in need and disadvantaged people while respecting their personal dignity and taking their cultural context into account.