

From Asia/ Indonesia

Skirting the ban

Illegal trawling takes a heavy toll on fishing communities in North Sumatra

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I met Lely Zailani recently, during a meeting in Thailand. She spoke of the problems facing fishworkers in the region she comes from: North Sumatra in Indonesia. The most important problem, she said, is the negative impact of trawling, both on the coastal environment and on the livelihood of local fishing communities.

What she said was surprising because it is commonly known that there is a complete ban on trawling in Indonesia. In fact, the government was forced to implement the trawl ban in the 1980s as a result of the pressure from artisanal fishworkers. To the outside world, Indonesia has always been held up as an example of a country that has successfully banned trawling activities in its waters.

However, talking to Lely, it became clear that the situation 'on the sea' is quite different. It appears that trawling continues due to poor enforcement, as well as the nexus between trawler owners and enforcement officials. Traditional fishermen in North Sumatra have been badly affected. They have tried to draw the attention of local officials to illegal trawling. They have even 'arrested' trawlers and handed them over to officials, only to find that they are released the very next day.

The conflict between local gillnet fishermen and trawlers has even turned violent on several occasions, and several artisanal fishermen have lost their lives as a consequence. Between 1993 and 1998, in the district of Teluk Mengkudu, Deli Serdang Region (North Sumatra) alone, 31 fishermen were killed. Several other unrecorded incidents took place in other regions, such as in Langkat, Asahan and Belawan. Obviously, the impact of this conflict on fishermen's wives has been high, as many of them have lost their husbands in it.

In 1998, fishworkers from three regions in North Sumatra—Langkat, Asahan Deli and Serdang—came

together to form the *Sarekat Nelayan Sumatera Utara* (SNSU) or North Sumatran Fishers Union. Women are active members in this union. The aim of the organization is to draw the attention of the government to the problems of artisanal fishermen, especially the problems from illegal trawling, and to make a case for technologies that do not destroy the coastal environment.