News

'We Hide While Working': The Life of Children Spraying Poison on a Pulp Plantation

By Tonggo Simangunsong **May 4, 2022, 3:51am**

The sun was still about half an hour from rising when the sound of *dangdut*

music broke the morning silence in the eucalyptus plantation barracks. The workers woke up from their sleep, rushing to get ready. At around 7 a.m, the laborers were ready and standing in a row in front of the wooden shacks, two trucks on standby to take them to the plantation in North Sumatra.

Their work for one of Indonesia's largest pulp and paper companies—Toba Pulp Lestari—includes planting seeds, spreading fertilizer and spraying weed poison. Most are adult women and men, some already have families. However, there were also children who went to work that day.

At just 14 years old, Sita is still a minor and not legally allowed to work under Indonesian law. Regardless, she was still hired to work for the company. A small, soft-spoken girl no taller than 5ft, wearing rubber boots and a sarong to protect her from the sun, she has been working on the plantation for a year.

"But we often hide while working," she told VICE World News, requesting a pseudonym for fear of losing her job. "When guests from outside the company visit the plantation, the supervisor will tell us to hide behind the trees."

THE BARRACKS IN THE EARLY MORNING AT THE TOBA PULP LESTARI PLANTATION. PHOTO: ALBERT IVAN DAMANIK

She said that her village is very remote, making it “very difficult to find work.” That fact brought her to Toba Pulp Lestari, a multimillion dollar pulp and paper firm operating a land concession of almost 168,000 hectares. Boasting net sales of Rp 1.8 trillion ($126 million) in 2020, mostly through exports to China, Toba Pulp’s controversial billionaire owner Sukanto Tanoto was once described by Greenpeace as holding the “dubious distinction of being the single largest driver of deforestation in the world” through his business empire.

But while Sukanto’s company has been linked with illegal deforestation, land grabbing from indigenous groups and polluting the surrounding area, less well documented is the role child labour plays in generating the firm’s multimillion-dollar profits.

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In February, VICE World News stayed for two days near one of the workers’ barracks on Toba Pulp Lestari’s plantation, taking a closer look at their daily

activities and living conditions. Despite being closely watched by a foreman, reporters spoke with five underage workers on the plantations living in inadequate conditions, working hazardous jobs with no health insurance, and with no access to education.

It's in these conditions that Sita has been working for Toba Pulp ever since she quit school at the beginning of 2021 and was offered a job at the plantation by her aunt, who also lives and works there. Her parents agreed and she left her village on the island of Nias off the coast of Sumatra, travelling for 12 hours by boat to Sibolga and then by bus for five hours to Toba Regency. [Map]

Since then, she has become one of the more than eight thousand daily casual workers working on the company's eucalyptus plantation. Based on its 2020 annual report, the company employs 1,195 staff directly and indirectly hires 7,000 laborers who are recruited by 267 local subcontractors that partner with the company.

Every day, Sita starts her work activities at 6 a.m and finishes at 4 p.m—that is, unless the weather is bad or she is too sick to work.

"If it rains we don't work and we don't get paid," she said. "If we are sick, we can't work, and we pay for the medical expenses ourselves." Like most other workers, she does not have health insurance.

Sita receives a daily wage of $6. In the best case scenario she can work 25 days a month and receive $150—below North Sumatra's minimum wage of around $175, and just shy of Indonesia's national poverty line of $151.06—the minimum income needed for day-to-day necessities. But in reality, owing to the weather, especially during Indonesia's wet season from October to February,

she works on average 20 days a month.

Sita lives in barracks provided by the company consisting of 30 stark 4×5-meter rooms, each one occupied by 4–6 people, often whole families, and serviced by low-voltage electricity only strong enough to power a lamp. The barracks have no bedrooms and at night the occupants of each compartment sleep in rows. There is only one bathroom for about 40 families—they take turns using it, Sita says.

“That’s how we are here,” she said. ”We’re used to it.”

THE WORKERS BARRACKS AT THE TOBA PULP LESTARI PLANTATION. PHOTO: ALBERT IVAN DAMANIK

In Indonesia, the 2003 Manpower Law no. 13 prohibits companies from employing persons under the age of 18 for hazardous work. Indonesia has also ratified the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the 1999 ILO

Convention No. 182 which prohibit the same.

As most underage workers at Toba Pulp's eucalyptus plantations are assigned the job of spraying weed poison, which has serious potential health implications, their employment at under the age of 18 is in violation of these acts. In Indonesia, the punishment for companies that employ minors for hazardous work is imprisonment of up to four years, and a fine of up to $28,000.

"But many plantation companies in Indonesia still employ children," Misran Lubis, a child labor researcher at the Child Labor Prevention Network (JARAK), told VICE World News. "There are companies that employ a family, then the children help their parents, and there are also companies that directly recruit children and pay them."

"Men, women and child laborers do the same work for planting and caring, there is no difference and the workload is the same and [they] receive the same nominal wages."

According to the Indonesian Central Statistics Agency, in 2020 there were 1.17 million child workers in the country, a figure that rose by some 320,000 compared to the previous year. The rise can be explained in part by growing poverty caused by interruptions to Indonesia's economy and education system due to the pandemic. Over recent decades, JARAK has documented child laborers in Indonesia's tobacco and oil palm plantations, tourism, agriculture, fisheries and manufacturing sectors, but the use of child labor on eucalyptus plantations was until recently less documented.

But in August last year, a 24-page investigative report published by a consortium of NGOs led by the Indonesian Trade Union Association of North

Sumatra exposed the use of child labor at the Toba Pulp plantation.

"Some of their children have dropped out of school and at age 15 are already working like their parents on the timber plantation," stated the report. "Men, women and child laborers do the same work for planting and caring, there is no difference and the workload is the same and [they] receive the same nominal wages."

Speaking to VICE World News, a labor supervisor close to the company, who asked not to be identified due to fears of losing his job, said that the use of contractors by Toba Pulp Lestari was at the heart of the child labour issue on its plantations. Technically speaking, he said, it's subcontractors and not Toba Pulp itself that recruit and employ the majority of workers on the plantations.

This degree of removal allows child labourers to slip into Toba Pulp's ranks, while also resulting in widespread labour exploitation for all workers.

The company pays subcontractors for each worker they employ to carry out the planting, spraying and felling of trees, with one contractor employing an average of 30 daily casual workers. For one of the core jobs, spraying for weeds, Toba Pulp pays the contractor $187.84 for 10 hectares. All workers, underage or not, receive $6 per day.

EUCALYPTUS TREES ARE TURNED INTO PULP AT THE TOBA PULP LESTARI PLANTATION. PHOTO: ALBERT IVAN DAMANIK

Officially, 30 workers are assigned an area of 10 hectares to spray for weeds over one working day. But this often rises to 15 hectares as contractors pressure laborers to work huge swathes of land, exceeding agreed-upon workloads, as they push to keep Toba Pulp’s business.

“Contractors certainly don’t want to lose [contracts], so the work target must be increased,” the anonymous supervisor said.

Delima Silalahi, the director of local NGO the Community Initiative Study and Development Group, which was also involved in the preparation of the August report on child labour at Toba Pulp, told VICE World News that the company can’t shirk its responsibilities by hiding behind contractors. She said its current practices “lead to slavery and ignore human values and human rights.”

“Companies cannot argue that the rights of workers in [their] concession areas are the responsibility of their partner companies,” she said. “Toba Pulp must ensure that its partners also comply with humane labor principles, make sure their partners guarantee the welfare and safety of their workers.”

VICE World News informed a Toba Pulp Lestari representative that child labourers were found at their plantations. In a written response on April 26, the company denied they employed anyone under 18. And while acknowledging that they partner with contractors for some of the company’s operations, the

representative said that contractors are required to comply with labor laws.

"In the cooperation agreement [with the contractor] it is stated that the age of workers must be above 18 years and the supervisor of workers in the field ensures that the age of workers must be above 18 years," said Toba Pulp Lestari's Corporate Communications Manager, Norma Patty Hutajulu.

THE TOBA PULP LESTARI MILL. THE COMPANY HAS BEEN ACCUSED OF LAND GRABBING AND POLLUTING THE SURROUNDING AREA. PHOTO: ALBERT IVAN DAMANIK

But despite official denials, the reality remains that Sita was just one of several minors VICE World News encountered at the plantation. Working alongside her was Mama Ida and her underage children.

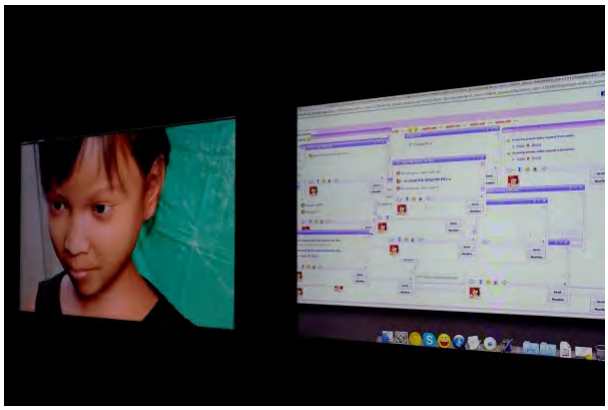
Ida, not her real name, has worked at the plantation for more than five years, with her children joining her last year in order to make ends meet. They live together in a single room at the barracks, with the children helping their mother

with planting, fertilizing and spraying for pests.

"I am registered as a casual daily laborer here and I get daily wages when I work. But if I don't work, I don't get paid, because I was recruited by a contractor, not directly by the company," said one of Ida's children. VICE World News has intentionally kept descriptions of the family vague to avoid identifying them.

The children are taken to the plantation at 7 a.m. each day by the foreman. On the second day VICE World News was at the plantation, two trucks transporting Ida's family, along with other workers from the barracks, rushed to leave—seemingly to evade scrutiny.

The field in which workers sprayed chemicals was eventually found by VICE World News, and Ida's underage children were seen spraying weed poison at the base of newly sprouted eucalyptus trees as a foreman watched on. Ida's children wore boots, casual clothes and plastic raincoats to protect their skin from poison ivy as they sprayed, but like most of the workers in the field, they weren't wearing protective goggles or masks to prevent inhalation of the chemicals.



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Despite the hazardous work they are doing, none of the family have health insurance. If they get sick, they pay for their own medical expenses out of their

already meagre wages.

"In the past, our boss said he would register us, but until now there is no health insurance card [that was promised]. I don't know why," one of the children said.

Spraying is dangerous and has the potential to poison workers. Several villagers recalled one former worker who inhaled poison as she was not wearing a mask. She ended up hospitalized at her own expense and no longer works at the plantation due to fears over her health. Based on the 2003 Manpower Law, every worker in Indonesia is entitled to protections ensuring occupational safety and health.

Vulnerable to the whims of their employer, and with other low-wage workers ready to take their place, Ida and her children are worried about being fired if they ask their boss too many questions about protective equipment. The children shook their heads when asked about whether a labour union existed for them, apparently not knowing what it meant.

"We don't have [a union] here. If we need something, we usually just talk to the foreman. He will pass it on to the boss," one said. Like Sita, if they don't work, they don't get paid.

"Yesterday we only worked half a day because of the rain. Today we will finish the work that was delayed yesterday."

"Children who work on the plantations too long will lose motivation [to seek a better life]… They have no dreams. Their way of thinking is short. Not only their lives—their minds are also narrow because they are often isolated."

Word spread about the presence of journalists during VICE World News' two-day visit. Visiting one of the barracks that stood near the plantation concession

area, several underage female workers did not go to work one day. A villager who lives close to the barracks said the girls had stayed behind because of the presence of reporters.

When asked, some of the girls claimed they were sick or taking care of the children of workers who had left for the fields that morning. Desi, a 14-year-old female casual daily worker who also requested a pseudonym, was one who remained in the barracks. She and other underage workers are instructed to hide whenever visitors or government officials visit the plantation.

“The supervisor commanded us to hide so we wouldn’t be found out,” she told VICE World News.

Two years ago, Desi quit school after her parents could no longer afford to send her. Her wages are the same as Sita’s, $120 if she manages 20 working days a month. The minor kept largely silent and smiled politely as her aunt spoke for her.

“Usually she works. If she doesn’t work, where do you get money from?” her aunt said, before boarding a truck for work herself.

WORKERS BOARD TRUCKS EACH MORNING TO BE TAKEN TO THE PLANTATION. ON THE DAY VICE WORLD NEWS REPORTERS WERE THERE, SEVERAL UNDERAGE GIRLS STAYED BEHIND AT THE BARRACKS. PHOTO: ALBERT IVAN DAMANIK

Sita once dreamed of becoming a teacher. But since last year she has given that up—quitting school in order to work at the plantation. Her days are exhausting. She’s stuck in a stagnant work routine—her world is just the barracks and the plantation, every day.

“At night, after work we just stay in this barracks. But we only occasionally go to town,” she said, referring to Porsea, about an hour away.

She rarely thinks about school these days, only work. From the job she transfers money to her parents and her three younger brothers back home—sometimes $35, sometimes $70 on a good month.

For Misran, the child labour researcher, it’s cases like Sita—children giving up on the hopes of a better life, even as they’re just starting out—that are the most heartbreaking. He called for urgency to end the practice, before another generation in Indonesia is lost to child labour.

“Children who work on the plantations too long will lose motivation [to seek a better life],” he said. “They have no dreams. Their way of thinking is short. Not only their lives—their minds are also narrow because they are often isolated.”

Sita’s aunt, the one who brought her to the plantation, tells her she should stay in school if she wants to become a teacher. But for now, Sita has little choice except to work—the 14-year-old’s family is depending on her.

“If I don’t work, I will not get money,” she said. “And I won’t be able to transfer money to my parents.”

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