Indonesian Water Defenders Under Siege in Bali

Pedro Arrojo Agudo, UN Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights to Safe Drinking Water and Sanitation, is threatened and assaulted in Bali, Indonesia

From 18 to 24 May 2024, Indonesia is hosting the 10th World Water Forum. This triennial event is convened by the World Water Council (WWC), a corporate-led, multi-stakeholder body that promotes private sector-driven solutions to water governance, management and delivery.

For almost two decades, water justice movements have come together to organize parallel forums to offer an open, accessible space for frontline communities, workers and water defenders to share knowledge and build solutions towards a just, equitable and sustainable water future for all. Water justice movements working together under the umbrella of the People’s Water Forum (PWF) firmly believe that water is life, that it is sacred and not a commodity but part of our global commons to be shared equitably and protected for future generations.

We are deeply concerned by the attacks on local organizers, academics and academic institutions that has led to the cancellation and disruption of People’s Water Forum sessions over the last few days. A press conference that took place on the afternoon of May 20 was violently disrupted by a masked group supported by the Patriot Garuda Nusantara (PGN), a sort of paramilitary force. Posters, billboards and banners of the PWF were torn down, while many local attendees were pushed and threatened.

Earlier today, it was reported that an even larger number of these same people had broken into the hotel where Indonesian social movements are staying, and were blockading the hotel. These water defenders are currently trapped in the hotel negotiating with a masked mob for their freedom of mobility and access to food, water and other essentials.

In this context, Pedro Arrojo, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights to Safe Drinking Water and Sanitation, visited the hotel accompanied by PWF activists to witness the situation and speak with those who were locked in.

On arrival at the entrance of the hotel, 50 uniformed men and a greater number of unidentified masked men in plain clothes confronted the Rapporteur and the three people who were accompanying him. Showing his blue UN passport, Mr. Arrojo asked to speak to the head of the security forces. The Rapporteur was not only prevented from entering the hotel, but was also threatened and shoved (as shown in this video). He and the PWF representatives accompanying him were forced to leave.

A group of academics have already signed a public letter explaining the threats so far observed and expressing their support for the activists blockaded in the hotel who are in grave danger.

As a platform of water justice networks from Africa, the Americas, Asia and Europe we demand:
- An end to the siege of the approximately 40 comrades who are currently trapped at the Oranje hotel in Denpasar without access to water, food and other basic supplies. They include representatives of communities in Indonesia on the frontlines of struggles for access to the human right to water and against pollution and the privatization of local water supplies. These are the voices that are being silenced to protect the image of the World Water Forum.
- An end to all forms of intimidation and violence targeting the PWF carried out by state officials, paid agents and paramilitaries.
- That the constitutional rights of Indonesian water defenders be restored immediately.
- That the international community speaks out to ensure that water remains a common good, accessible to all and not just a few. This is everyone’s fight.

The People's Water Forum in Bali (Indonesia)
21 May 2024