

## Impact of the Trans-Sumatra Toll Road on Talang Jerinjing Indigenous Graves

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### ABSTRACT

*The development of the Trans-Sumatra Toll Road, designated as a national strategic project, has had a substantial impact on the Talang Mamak indigenous community in Talang Jerinjing Village, Indragiri Hulu Regency, Riau. A central issue arising from this development is the dispute over customary burial grounds, which hold sacred significance and are deeply embedded in the cultural identity of the community. This study aims to examine the chronology of the conflict, the effects of toll road construction on burial sites, and the strategies employed by indigenous communities to uphold their rights. A qualitative approach was adopted, based on literature review and field observation. The findings reveal that limited community involvement in the planning stages and the weak legal safeguards for customary land have provoked opposition and posed a risk of social fragmentation. In response, indigenous groups have undertaken advocacy efforts and customary consultations to protect ancestral burial grounds. The study underscores the need for inclusive participation of indigenous peoples and stronger legal protections throughout all phases of infrastructure development to ensure cultural preservation and social justice.*

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

The Trans-Sumatra Highway is a north-south road across the island of Sumatra spanning 2,508.5 kilometers, connecting Banda Aceh in the north to Bandar Lampung in the south. It passes through several major cities, including Medan, Pekanbaru, Jambi, and Palembang. Since 2012, the Indonesian government has planned the construction of the Trans-Sumatra toll road stretching approximately 2,700 kilometers, with a budget allocation reaching IDR 150 trillion. This national strategic project is divided into several development phases, with Phase II scheduled for gradual completion starting in June 2025. The aim of the toll road construction is to improve regional

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connectivity across Sumatra, support economic growth, and facilitate the distribution of goods and services between provinces on the island.

Talang Jerinjing is one of the villages located in Rengat Barat Subdistrict, Indragiri Hulu Regency, Riau Province, where the majority of residents make a living from oil palm and rubber plantations. The village comprises four hamlets, including Hamlet IV Sungai Pulus, which is home to the indigenous Talang Mamak community. The Talang Mamak people in Talang Jerinjing Village have a distinct social structure with traditional leadership such as the *Batin Adat*, who governs the community's social and cultural life. The presence of this indigenous community has existed for generations, maintaining a close relationship with the land as part of their cultural identity—particularly land used for burial purposes, which is considered sacred.

On January 24, 2024, a total of 32 members of the Talang Mamak indigenous community in Hamlet IV carried out a communal work activity (*gotong royong*) to install stone/concrete markers to physically designate the location of their public cemetery. The activity, led by Penser, a cultural affairs officer from the Indigenous Peoples Alliance of the Archipelago (AMAN), aimed to ensure that the cemetery—which had long been neglected and unmarked—could be properly identified. This burial site holds sacred and vital cultural significance for the Talang Mamak people, as it is regulated according to their traditional customs. The cemetery land serves a critical social and cultural role as the final resting place for their ancestors and symbolizes the continuity of the community's belief system and traditions.

The construction of the Trans-Sumatra toll road faces various challenges, particularly in the process of land acquisition, especially when dealing with customary land. By the end of 2024, the construction progress had reached approximately 85% of the target, delayed from the initial completion goal set for 2023. Legal issues surrounding the acquisition of customary land for infrastructure development require a special approach to avoid infringing on the rights of indigenous communities. In the context of Talang Jerinjing Village, there is concern that the Trans-Sumatra toll road project may impact the cemetery land that the indigenous community has long preserved and maintained. If an overlap occurs between the toll route and the cemetery site, it may lead to complex legal, social, and cultural issues, potentially triggering conflict between development interests and indigenous rights.

## 2. METHOD

This research approach uses qualitative methods. The type of approach used is a literature study, which combines various theories relevant to the study topic. Library research is conducted by collecting data from books, literature, notes, and documents related to the issue being studied. The author uses the literature writing method to write this article by collecting data from theories through the conflict issues that occur at the conflict site. However, in the process of compiling this scientific work, the data collection technique used is observational study.

Library research usually employs data collection techniques through literature review by utilizing primary and secondary sources. Primary data includes documents that contain scientific information, facts, or ideas. Secondary sources consist of documents that contain general knowledge or ideas. Researchers utilize relevant literature to obtain extensive information in discovering theories. Books, journals, magazines, and research findings are some examples of library sources. After obtaining the relevant literature, it should be organized systematically. Therefore, the literature review includes general procedures such as: systematically identifying theories, finding information in the library, and analyzing documents that contain descriptions or data about the research subject. Next, technically, a literature review is the process of researching, studying, and finding information related to the subject being investigated in the literature. This type of knowledge can be found through reading materials, reference books, or other study results.

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Library studies are based on the idea that almost all research activities are derived from existing knowledge. Additionally, researchers utilize theories from repositories of scientific knowledge for their research purposes, and they always begin their research by looking at what other experts have said (Evanorisa et al., 2022). Based on several understandings of the literature review mentioned above, it can be concluded that a literature review is very important for every researcher to conduct before starting further research because it will greatly assist researchers in determining hypotheses and assumptions for the next research topic, while also assuring readers that the upcoming research has not been conducted before. The method for processing data obtained from research is known as data analysis. Literature review is part of the research we conducted. There are three stages involved in the data analysis process in this research.

1. Data simplification: This stage involves the process of summarizing and sorting out unimportant data to make it easier to understand when drawing conclusions. We conducted data reduction by selecting data from books and journals used in this research.
2. Data Presentation: After the data reduction is complete, this research organizes the data in a concise and compact form. Because this research uses a qualitative approach and usually does not seek data sources directly, this research relies on written literature, including published and unpublished research findings. This is done to identify the differences and similarities with previous research.
3. Drawing Conclusions: Conclusions can be drawn after the data reduction and presentation process is complete. This is used to explain the basis of the research conducted. The conclusion also includes solutions to the problem formulation that has been made previously.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### **Chronology of Conflict and the Impact of Toll Road Construction on Customary Burial Land**

Infrastructure development is part of the national strategy to accelerate economic growth and inter-regional connectivity (Simbolon *et al*, 2021). One of these strategic projects is the Trans Sumatra Toll Road (JTTS), including the Jambi – Rengat section. However, behind the promised economic benefits, the toll road project poses various pros and cons, especially when the development is in direct contact with indigenous peoples. One of the prominent cases occurred in Talang Kerinjing Village, Batang Gansal District, Indragiri Hulu Regency, Riau Province, which is a residential area for the indigenous people of the Talang Mamak Tribe. The Talang Mamak tribe is an indigenous community that still maintains traditional values and strong local wisdom. The Talang Mamak tribe people live side by side with nature and have a social structure and belief system that is inherited from generation to generation. Respect for ancestors is one of the important elements in the culture of the Talang Mamak tribe, which is reflected in the existence of traditional burial sites. The cemetery not only serves as a final resting place, but also as a symbol of the community's collective existence and identity (Mongabay, 2016).

The chronology of this conflict began in early 2021 when the central government through PT Hutama Karya and the Ministry of PUPR began to socialize the construction plan for the JTTS Jambi – Rengat section. In the initial process, the Talang Mamak indigenous people expressed objections because they were not directly involved in the discussion of the development plan. Opposition began to strengthen in mid-2021, when the community learned that the toll road route would cross the burial area of their ancestors that was considered sacred and immovable. Since then, the community has begun to hold various customary forums and voice objections to local governments and national institutions. In 2022, several indigenous representatives even sent official rejection letters and asked for a review of the designed route. This problem triggered rejection from indigenous peoples who felt that their rights and cultural values were being ignored. Based on various local and national media reports, it was stated that the community rejected the plan due to the lack of consultation and meaningful participation in the project planning process. The existence of ancestral burials that are considered sacred is not seriously considered in feasibility studies or environmental and social

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impact analyses (EIAs) (Tempo Witness, 2021). The presence of the toll road project not only threatens cultural sites, but also raises the potential for social disintegration. Conflicts between indigenous peoples and project implementers reflect power imbalances and weak recognition of indigenous peoples' rights. The absence of an anthropological approach in the planning of this project exacerbates the condition because the cultural and social aspects of the local community are not well accommodated (Fakhurozi *et al.*, 2021).

Although the project implementers promised not to move the graves and would only build a concrete guardrail around the cemetery area, the response did not do enough to assuage community concerns. For the Talang Mamak Tribe, the existence of a cemetery is not just a physical location but part of the relationship between humans and nature and an irreplaceable value system. The treatment of ancestral graves is considered a reflection of respect for the collective identity and dignity of the community (Liputan6.com, 2025). In addition to cultural aspects, other economic and social impacts are also felt by the surrounding communities affected by the construction of the toll road. Many residents are in danger of losing agricultural land which is the main source of livelihood. Land evictions without fair compensation or humane relocation mechanisms create economic uncertainty for communities. Not only that, the decision-making process tends to *be top-down* and exacerbates inequality in the distribution of benefits and burdens from development projects (Fuadi and Nasrudin, 2022).

The conflict that occurred in Talang Kerinjing is a reflection of the great challenge in harmonizing between national development and the preservation of local culture. Therefore, there is a need for policies that prioritize the existence of indigenous peoples and strengthen legal protection mechanisms for the rights of indigenous peoples. Sustainable development is not only measured in terms of economy, but also in its ability to maintain social, cultural, and ecological harmony. Constructive dialogue, cultural mediation, and guarantees of protection of indigenous sites should be integral to the settlement strategy. Only in this way can development truly bring fair and sustainable benefits to all levels of society.

### **Community Efforts**

The first step taken by the community was to hold a deliberation at the house of Batin Adat (traditional leaders) to discuss the threat of development to the ancestral grave site. In this forum, the community voiced their opposition to the removal of the tomb and emphasized that the cemetery is part of their identity and respect for their predecessors. This vote is then conveyed to the government and the project implementer as a form of collective aspiration. To strengthen protection efforts, the community also conducted surveys and data collection directly to the location of the cemetery in the Bungin River, which is within the route of the toll project plan. They agreed to mark the location with physical signs such as fences or stone markers, as a form of protection against the sacred site. Around 20 residents even held a special meeting to prepare a plan to make the marker in early 2024.

This reflects the community's awareness of the importance of documentation and protection of cultural heritage sites. In addition, the community is also involved in coordination meetings with local governments, including the Indragiri Hulu Regency Government and PT Hutama Karya as the implementer of the toll project. In the meeting, an agreement was reached that the tomb would not be moved, but the construction design would be adjusted so as not to disturb the cemetery site. PT Hutama Karya stated its commitment to build a concrete fence around the tomb as a form of respect and protection for the site. The efforts of the indigenous people of Talang Mamak reflect a form of constructive cultural resistance. They do not reject development totally, but rather encourage development to be carried out with respect for the existence of local communities and their cultural heritage. This approach is an example of how development should run inclusively, respect indigenous rights, and pay attention to the values of local wisdom.

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### **Parties involved and conflict resolution efforts**

Agrarian conflict resolution can generally be carried out through a litigation approach or legal channels or non-litigation outside the courts. Lewis Coser's social conflict theory and John Burton's conflict resolution theory emphasize the importance of dialogue, negotiation, and mediation as an effort to find common ground between conflicting interests. Resolving agrarian disputes through non-litigation channels, such as mediation, conciliation, and arbitration, is often the main choice because it is considered capable of producing a more just and sustainable solution. This is due to the direct and active involvement of all parties to the dispute. This approach is also in line with the theory of law and society which sees law not just as a normative tool, but also as the result of dynamic social interactions, so that conflict resolution must pay attention to local values, customs, and the interests of the local community (Musaffah and Maharani, 2024). The government attempted to resolve this conflict by forming two task forces, namely Task Force A and Task Force B.

Task Force A is tasked with identifying and mapping the condition of graves affected by the toll road project, while Task Force B focuses on identifying and orienting four burial locations, with priority on the three main locations that have been identified. Both task forces consist of representatives from the local government, related agencies such as the Land Office, and the project implementers (Tribun Pekanbaru Travel, 2021). The Talang Mamak indigenous community rejects the relocation of their ancestral graves that will be affected by the construction of the toll road. They adhere to customs that prohibit the relocation of graves, because they are considered to be able to disrupt spiritual relationships with ancestors and have a negative impact on the community. As a form of response from PT Hutama Karya, which acts as the project implementer, it stated that the location of the graves would not be moved because their position is on the edge of the toll road. Instead, a concrete fence will be built to protect the graves from the impact of the project (Riau Karya, 2021). The parties involved in resolving this conflict include the Talang Mamak indigenous community, the local government of Indragiri Hulu Regency, PT Hutama Karya as the project implementer, and related agencies such as the Land Office. They work together in Task Force A and Task Force B to ensure that the infrastructure development process does not ignore the cultural and spiritual values of the local community. Through dialogue and design adjustments, the conflict between infrastructure development and cultural heritage preservation can be minimized.

### **CONCLUSION**

The construction of the Trans Sumatra Toll Road (Jambi-Rengat section) has led to significant conflict with the Talang Mamak indigenous community in Indragiri Hulu, particularly in relation to customary land and ancestral burial sites that have high spiritual and cultural value. The indigenous community resists the removal of the graves as it violates their customs and threatens their spiritual connection to their ancestors and collective identity. This conflict reflects the tension between national infrastructure development projects and the protection of indigenous peoples' rights. The absence of meaningful community participation in the project planning stage exacerbated the situation, demonstrating the state's weak recognition of customary law and local wisdom. The Talang Mamak community showed constructive forms of cultural resistance through customary deliberations, site data collection, and dialog with the government and project implementers. Conflict resolution is carried out through non-litigation approaches, such as mediation and project design adjustments to avoid moving tombs, with a commitment from PT Hutama Karya to protect the site through concrete fences. This case reflects the importance of an inclusive approach and respect for the existence of indigenous peoples in development projects. Policies are needed that guarantee the legal protection of customary rights and the active involvement of local communities in order to realize equitable, sustainable and socio-cultural development.

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