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Priests and nuns in Flores protest on March 12 in front of the Ngada Regent office demanding a revocation permit for the Mataloko geothermal project. (Courtesy photo)

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Catholic priests and nuns joined hundreds of activists demanding to stop a geothermal project on the predominantly Catholic Flores island in Indonesia, saying the project violates villagers' land rights and damages the environment.

Protestors marched through public roads on March 12 to the office of Regent Raymundus Bena in Ngada Regency, demanding to revoke the permit for the project in Mataloko, run by the state's electricity company, PT Perusahaan Listrik Negara.

"This project is killing us; it is only supporting the investors and their friends," said the Alliance for Flores Geothermal Victims, which coordinated the protest in a statement.

Divine Word Fr. Felix Baghi, the alliance's chairman, said the project has encroached on 996 hectares of indigenous people's agricultural land in Mataloko.

The project started in 1998. But it has failed to generate electricity so far, with its former drilling hole continuing to emit hot mud up to 500 meters to one kilometer, damaging farmlands, Baghi said.

The protesters included Catholics from two parishes of the Archdiocese of Ende's Commission for Justice, Peace, and Integrity of Creation. Priests of Franciscan and Divine Word congregations and seminarians of the Ledalero Institute of Philosophy and Creative Technology also joined.

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Baghi said the project is being worked on again, while several new mudflows have reappeared since December, destroying the land, which is the primary source of villagers' livelihood.

The project, if continued, "will result in the loss of thousands of hectares of agricultural, threatening the lives of local people," he added.

"The Ngada Regency Government should be more critical in determining the priority, he added.

Maria Anjelina Mogi, an Indigenous villager in Mataloko, told UCA News that since the project started, her community "has suffered losses, both socially, economically,

and environmentally."

"If the government is with the people, revoking the permit must be its priority," she said.

Despite its failure, the continuation of the project shows that it is a trial disregarding the fundamental rights of people and any environmental concerns, she said.

A similar protest rally was held in Jakarta on March 12 in front of the Ministry of Energy and Mineral Resources office.

Protestors submitted to ministry officials a statement demanding the revocation of all geothermal permits in Flores, said Franciscan Fr. Yohanes Wahyu, who participated in the Jakarta protest.

Although the government claims geothermal energy is clean, the priest said several issues attached to it make the claim void.

The church peoples' protest against the project intensified after Archbishop Paulus Budi Kleden of Ende spoke against the project in January, ending the official church's silence on such projects.

According to the Energy and Mineral Resources Ministry, Flores has a potential of 902 megawatts or 65% of the total capacity in East Nusa Tenggara province.

The authorities have identified 16 project sites on the island amid mounting resistance from local people.