ACEH'S forest areas are in danger of illegal logging. The need for timber for post-tsunami reconstruction has caused the over-exploitation of dipterocarp species high-quality wood that resulted in the recent flooding of some parts of Aceh.

This can be seen at Babahrot in Southwest Aceh. This forest area in the Leuser nature conservation area has been infiltrated by a number of workers looking for red meranti (Shorea sp.) wood reportedly to meet the needs for timber for several reconstruction sites. In the past this was the location of a forest concessionaire since 1978. But in 2000, this timber company stopped its operations. Today, the urgent need for wood for reconstruction makes the lumberjacks start illegal logging.

In view of these indications, Conservation International (CI) Indonesia and several NGOs are launching a drive to save Aceh's ecosystem. According to Dr Didy Wurjanto, Terrestrial Program Director of CI Indonesia, the effort has yielded a comprehensive mapping of Aceh. The Aceh government and the Aceh-Nias Rehabilitation & Reconstruction Agency (BRR) have conducted the mapping to clearly identify the regions designated for settlements, plantations and forest exploitation.

In order to lessen the pressure on the Aceh forests, CI Indonesia in collaboration with WWF-Indonesia through USAID support encourages the Timber for Aceh (TFA) program, a timber-aid program for post-tsunami Aceh reconstruction. This particular campaign is carried out at all levels of the community and the government. "The Aceh people are very religious, so they would always listen to what the religious clerics say," said Fachruddin Mangunjaya of CI Indonesia.

Through religious and cultural approaches, according to Didy, some Aceh people start to know environment-friendly methods of farming. "They
make a conscious effort to choose to use organic fertilizers and not transgress into forest reserves," said Didy.

As "rewards" for these conservation actions by the people, CI Indonesia makes every effort to find markets for the plantation products being turned out by the people. For coffee, for example, Mt Leuser National Park, Aceh (left). Elephant patrol in the Leuser Ecosystem area, Langkat, North Sumatra.

Didy said there are potential buyers offering a high price for the item as an incentive for such conservation practices. Of course these potential buyers will not buy the coffee if the people do not support the conservation efforts. "So, through conservation the people also gain benefits. And, above all else, the Aceh people have learned to look after the forests and their contents which are a legacy for posterity," said Didy.

Environment-Friendly Timber

The moratorium on illegal logging had actually been put into effect since the days of Governor Abdullah Puteh's administration. This policy had reduced timber supplies in Aceh. Of course this affected the post-tsunami reconstruction process which calls for a great amount of timber. This causes worries on the part of several environmental organizations about the opportunity for forest exploitation in the name of reconstruction.

Nana Firman, WWF-Indonesia's Aceh Program Coordinator, says: "There's need for some 1.5-1.6 million cubic meters of logs or about 800,000-900,000 cubic meters." To build a house of a 36-square-meter size, for example, requires 3 cubic meters of timber. If this raw material is taken from the forests, we can imagine the magnitude of pressure on the natural resources in Aceh.

To help anticipate this, CI Indonesia along with WWF-Indonesia through the USAID support encourages the Timber for Aceh (TFA) program. Through this program, the timber used for reconstruction is donated from outside Indonesia.

According to Nana, there are two schemes to obtain it. First, it is donated by companies from outside Indonesia. Second, advocacy to Humanitarian Agency to use environment-friendly timber.

This program has succeeded in bringing more than 45,000 cubic meters of timber to Aceh and Nias. The remaining 20,000 cubic meters are under shipment.

It is expected that this timber aid will inspire awareness to the Aceh government and population to boost the preservation of the forest areas. "This will enhance the image of Aceh rehabilitation for paying attention to the principles of environment," says Dr Didy Wurjanto, Terrestrial Program Director of CI Indonesia.