



# For **investigative journalists** in Indonesia ‘the threats are real’

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Wednesday, December 11, 2019

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When Indonesian journalist Nurhadi's investigation into toxic waste at military bases raised questions from officials, Free Press Unlimited partner Tempo helped him into hiding. Now, his story is published and his commitment to journalism unshattered.

## Public interest

Initially, Nurhadi saw journalism as a way to turn his hobby, writing, into a career. He soon found the mission of a journalist went beyond reporting on events to the public. "There is a responsibility to serve and defend the public interest," he said.

In 2018, he joined an investigative journalism fellowship by Tempo Institute, a journalism training centre affiliated with Indonesian weekly politics and current affairs magazine Tempo. The fellowship, which is supported by Free Press Unlimited, gives journalists a chance to do in-depth investigations with training and mentorship from Tempo Institute.

Between September and December 2018, Nurhadi visited eight military locations. He was looking into the accumulation of toxic and hazardous waste at the bases, when things got tense.

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*A truck allegedly dumping waste at a military base in Sidoarjo, East Java*

## **In hiding**

In December, Nurhadi ran into difficulties. He had gone to an airbase in East Java for an interview, but was told he could not use any stationery or recording equipment. Nurhadi decided to cancel the interview and left the base fearing for his own security.

Nurhadi was putting the final touches to his investigation in February 2019 when a colleague reached out to him. “My senior journalist colleague told me Air Force intelligence was looking for me. One of the intelligence personnel came to ask [him] directly. After I told him about the coverage I was working on, he suggested that I should immediately hide,” he said.

Tempo understood that the nature of Nurhadi's investigation posed a serious risk for him. On 9 February, 2019, Tempo decided to evacuate Nurhadi and his wife from their home in Surabaya, East Java, for their own safety. They stayed hidden for two months. During this time, Nurhadi received financial help from Free Press Unlimited's Reporters Respond fund to cover basic needs and psychosocial support.

## Common occurrence

Nurhadi says that situations like his are common occurrence in Indonesian press. "As long as we only report things that are general and popular, there is no danger. For investigative reporting on certain issues, the threats are real."

Nurhadi acknowledges that working with a reputable organisation like Tempo makes a big difference. "The senior editor of Tempo took a number of actions to ensure my safety. Unfortunately, not all journalists have the same advantage," he said. "There need to be clear protection standards for journalists in Indonesia. This protection must be given from the beginning of the investigative reporting process. [Publications should] not wait for intimidation to happen first."

## More work to be done

On 18 February, 2019, Tempo published Nurhadi's investigation. It alleged that eight military bases in East Java were used as disposal sites for hazardous waste. According to the investigation, the bases were taking under-the-table payments to let companies discard the waste, which has "injured local residents and killed crops". The cover story prompted an investigation by the Indonesian Ministry of Forestry and Environment.

Seeing the results of his work motivated Nurhadi to continue. "I am increasingly challenged to conduct investigative coverage again. Initially there was fear, but the fear left when the coverage of the investigation was published and there was an impact that could be felt by the public. I believe investigative journalism is an important key to realising an open and democratic society."



*Alleged hazardous waste dumping activities at a military air base in Raci District, East Java*

*Photos: Nurhadi*

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