

Deadly haze from forest fires engulfs South East Asia

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The haze engulfing much of South East Asia from deliberately lit Indonesian forest fires, largely in Sumatra and Kalimantan, is likely to last until November due to the El Niño weather pattern that will delay the onset of the wet season. The lighting of fires to clear land is an annual event.

More than 1,000 fires are burning, many in peat lands making them hard to extinguish. Indonesian officials say that more than 25,000 security and fire personnel have been deployed to fight the fires. Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam, as well as Indonesia, have all been badly affected.

The levels of air pollution this year will equal or exceed those of 1997, the worst season on record, and are already above those of 2013, the second worst season. In 1997 there were 10,800 known deaths from cardiovascular disease attributed to the extra smoke in the air, but the actual death toll is likely to have been far higher.

The environmental group Greenpeace estimates about 110,000 die each year from pollution related diseases as a result of the annual haze.

A World Health Organisation report released in March last year estimated that in 2012 seven million people died prematurely worldwide as a result of exposure to air pollution, doubling the previous estimate and making air pollution the largest environmental health risk. The annual fires in South East Asia are a major contributing factor to air pollution.

Low and middle income earners in South East Asia and the Western Pacific regions had the highest number of air pollution related deaths in that year—3.3 million from indoor air pollution and 2.6 million from outdoor air pollution. The main causes of death including heart disease, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, lung

cancer and acute lower respiratory infections is in children.

By mid-October this year, 1.7 million hectares of forest and plantation land had been ravaged by fires in Sumatra and Kalimantan, with the regional economic cost so far estimated at \$US14 billion. Schools have been closed for days on end and hundreds of flights have been cancelled. Indonesia's health ministry reported 20 million people have had their health affected by the haze with over 20,000 seeking medical help.

In Palangkaraya, the capital of Central Kalimantan, Pollutant Standards Index (PSI) readings on September 23 reached 2,000 PSI and hovered around 1,090 into the afternoon. Anything above 151 is regarded as unhealthy and above 350 is hazardous. These are the highest readings ever recorded during the fire season.

The illegal burning is a cheap method to clear land for logging, pulp and paper production and particularly for palm oil plantations. The land targeted for palm oil includes peat land, which contributes disproportionately to the toxic haze. These swampy areas are rich in organic matter and have to be drained for plantation use.

The combination of the El Niño weather pattern and the extent of peat lands being burnt explains the severity of this year's haze.

The crisis is entirely man-made and is driven in large part by Indonesian, Malaysian and Singaporean palm oil companies, which made \$18.4 billion in profit last year, seeking to expand production. From 2009 to 2014, palm oil production in Indonesia has increased from 19 million tonnes to around 32 million tonnes. Indonesian-based producers account for around 53 percent of global output.

The big plantation companies have signed no burn

pledges and blame impoverished farmers and small-scale operators for the illegal burning.

The cost of clearing land by fire is less than 10 percent of using mechanical means. Uncertain land ownership obscures responsibility for the fires, as does the use of contractors and sub-contractors for clearing land.

Global Forest Watch reported that its monitoring in one week of September found that 35 percent of fires occurred in palm oil, pulpwood or logging concessions.

The Indonesian government has suspended four companies and is investigating 200 for causing the fires. One of those suspended was a member of the Indonesian Palm Oil Association, which requires its members to have a no-burn policy. The Association withdrew earlier this month from the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO), a non-profit organisation set up in 2004 to establish and certify ethical and ecological standards in palm oil production.

The flurry of investigations and some arrests is nothing new in the fire season. Very few prosecutions have been pursued in the past. Corruption is involved from the local and national levels. The *Guardian* in June pointed to the practice whereby local officials reallocate ecologically sensitive areas that had been protected from one company, to other companies for exploitation.

The fact that the burning operations are an established part of clearing activities explains the Indonesian government's slow and inadequate response to the fires. President Joko Widodo asked for international help in the past few weeks. Late last month, Vice President Jusuf Kalla repeated his statement of earlier in the year that neighbouring countries "should be grateful" to Indonesia for clean air for 11 months of the year.

Widodo asked for firefighting assistance during his meeting with Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak in Jakarta on October 11. However, the main purpose of the meeting was to establish a cartel between the world's two largest palm oil producers to stabilise falling prices and undermine environmental standards. The cartel will lobby the two biggest national customers, India and China, to accept the cartel's own standards rather than those set by RSPO.

While the European Union, which sets environmental standards for imports, is the second biggest importer of

palm oil, 55 percent goes to India, the world's largest importer. Other major importers are China, Pakistan, Egypt, Bangladesh and Burma. The product is regarded as the "poor man's oil."



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