Indonesian fires expose millions in South East Asia to toxic smoke

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Forest and land fires in Indonesia have exposed more than 12.5 million people to hazardous smoke, closed schools and disrupted transport. Severe drought has intensified a disaster unfolding across landscapes made more combustible by drainage and commercial development.

Health Ministry figures between August 18 and September 21 recorded 174,694 cases of acute respiratory infection in seven fire-affected provinces since August 18, including more than 40,000 children under five.

The worst-affected regions include Sumatra and Kalimantan, Indonesia's portion of Borneo, with substantial burning also reported in South Papua. The fires remain highly volatile. High-confidence satellite hotspots surged to more than 1,500 nationally on September 20 before falling to 688 the following day. Despite the decline, thick smoke continued to blanket Central Kalimantan, where visibility at Palangka Raya airport fell to around 400 metres.

More than 1.4 million students had been shifted to online learning by September 9. In Palembang, South Sumatra, approximately 250,000 students across 1,030 schools were affected, placing additional burdens on households without reliable internet access.

The disaster has crossed national borders, with Malaysia declaring a local emergency on September 4 in the Serian district of Sarawak, after its Air Pollution Index (API) exceeded 500. A scale between 201–300 is considered very unhealthy, with 301–500 creating severe health effects.

The API is an index derived from concentrations of pollutants in the air, microscopic enough to bypass lung tissue and enter the bloodstream directly. From there, the particles can trigger systemic inflammation, heart issues and long-term health complications.

A resident of Serian, in Malaysia told *Firstpost News*, "It's hard for me to go out of the house. I only leave to buy vegetables like this, and then I go home. I just got out of the hospital because I needed a nebulizer. My throat was so itchy because of the haze."

As of September 20, emergency operations in Indonesia have involved more than 64 aircraft and helicopters, and more than 54,000 emergency personnel, including water bombing crews, patrols, ground crews and cloud seeding. Japan sent three Chinook helicopters to assist, and Malaysia has pledged one aircraft and three helicopters with 52 firefighting personnel.

In Central Kalimantan on September 21, the smoke itself became so thick that water-bombing helicopters could not fly. Prolonged drought has complicated suppression efforts with authorities reporting difficulty finding water and the military drilling new wells. The Health Ministry reported sending nearly one million masks, hundreds of oxygen concentrators and thousands of medical workers to affected areas.

For affected households, lost earnings are compounded by additional medical expenses and unpaid care. At a September 10 public discussion, Yuli Suryantika of the Indonesian Women's Coalition in Pontianak described falling incomes alongside higher spending on masks and medicines, increased cleaning and responsibility for sick relatives.

Nia Kurniawati, a disabled resident of Bengkayang, West Kalimantan, reported that her canteen business had stopped, water sources were drying up and smoke was restricting her mobility. She said she had received no government relief and appealed for clean water, masks and medical supplies.

Exceptional dryness has helped fires spread. NASA attributed the conditions to a super El Niño combined with a positive Indian Ocean Dipole, two ocean-temperature patterns that can reduce rainfall over Indonesia. The World Meteorological Organization has noted that this naturally occurring El Niño cycle now operates against a background of human-caused global warming.

The scale of the fires was already apparent before the peak of the dry season. Forestry Ministry figures show that some 202,000 hectares burned between January and July, compared with 137,000 hectares during the same period in 2019 and fewer than 93,000 in 2023—both major El Niño-driven fire years. Only the catastrophic 2015 season was substantially worse at the same stage, with around 600,000

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hectares burned by the end of July.

The fire season subsequently intensified sharply during August, when 90 percent of Indonesia received little or no rain early in the month, and September. The costs associated with the 2015 fires were twice that of reconstruction following the 2004 tsunami.

Such extensive areas in Indonesia are combustible due to the drying up of wetlands and peat—a giant layer of organic material under the ground. Normally waterlogged, it becomes vulnerable to burning when the water table lowers. Once ignited, peat can smolder underground for days or even weeks, generating persistent smoke and resisting surface firefighting.

The causes for Indonesia's fires are well established. Burning has long been used in Indonesia to prepare land for agriculture, including palm oil and pulpwood plantations. A 2016 World Bank report entitled "The Cost of Fire: An Economic Analysis of Indonesia's 2015 Fire Crisis" concluded:

Man-made fires—more than 100,000 of them—were used to prepare land for agriculture and to gain access to land cheaply. Absent controlled burning measures or sufficient law enforcement, the fires grew out of control, fed by drought and exacerbated by the effects of El Niño. This vast economic and environmental crisis is repeated year after year, as a few hundred businesses and a few thousand farmers profit from land and plantation speculation practices, while tens of millions of Indonesians suffer health costs and economic disruptions.

Another major study published in the *Review of Economic Studies* in 2025 identified more than 107,000 fires in Indonesia's main forested islands and found that fires were eight times more likely to start inside oil-palm and wood-fibre concessions than inside selective-logging concessions. They concluded that the geographic pattern was consistent with fire being systematically used as a relatively cheap method of clearing land for industrial plantations.

In a bid to placate public anger, Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto has ordered permit revocations and criminal investigations into corporations proven responsible for fires. As of September 16, police had reported 219 cases of illegal fires, 162 individual suspects and 95 corporations under investigation.

More than a decade on from the 2015 disaster, the Indonesian government has not only failed to prevent the use of fire for land clearing but has significantly exposed the land to further deterioration.

The mandate of the Peatland and Mangrove Restoration Agency (BRGM), created after the 2015 fires, expired at the end of 2024 following the election of President Prabowo Subianto and was not renewed. The agency was disbanded, with responsibilities supposedly divided up between other ministries and civil servants reassigned. Non-permanent employees were simply dismissed.

Three new regional peat and mangrove management offices were not formally established until August 2025. Some officials confirmed earlier this year that previous monitoring infrastructure (the PRIMS restoration database and SIPALAGA peat-water monitoring network) had not resumed full operation.

"Now, with the BRGM abolished, everything is just about fire management or going backwards from previous years," Wahyu told *Tempo* in April.

Disaster funding under the national disaster management agency BNPB has also been slashed. The initial 2025 budget allocated to BNPB's *Program Ketahanan Bencana* (Disaster Resilience Program) was Rp1.121 trillion ($US62.6 million), subsequently reduced to Rp707 billion as part of Prabowo's "efficiency cuts." For 2026, the initial allocation sunk further to just Rp250 billion, alongside Rp241 billion for management support, 78 percent lower than the original 2025 allocation.

The government's handling of the disaster is also facing a legal challenge. On September 19, a coalition of indigenous and civil-society organisations in West Kalimantan filed a class action against Prabowo and other officials, alleging negligence and a failure to prevent and contain the recurring fires. The first hearing is scheduled for October 7.

Columbia University researcher Robert Field told NASA that underground fires would continue until sustained rainfall returned: "They'll keep burning until the rains come in October or November."

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