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Clearing the air

By HAKY MOON and ALFRED ROMANN in Hong Kong

After last year's severe haze, Southeast Asian countries work to target errant firms, set new laws and restore peat lands but poverty remains the root of the problem



When pollution spiked on Aug 26, Singapore residents got a taste of unpleasant déjà vu. The haze was not domestic but imported from Indonesia, where once again fires are lit to clear land for agriculture.

The city-state's National Environment Agency recorded a Pollutant Standards Index reading of 215 at 2 pm, about five times the average and above the "very unhealthy" level.

The reading dropped by the evening and Singapore has, mostly, avoided the impact of the fires in Indonesia this year but the fear of a repeat of last year's severe haze conditions remains strong.

While benevolent weather and efforts by Indonesia and regional peers have helped cut down the number of fires and subsequent haze, the problem is one that looms large for the region.

A key factor impeding progress is poverty. Nearly 40 percent of Indonesians live just above the poverty line, according to the International Fund for Agricultural Development.

They need to farm to live, and the only way they can do this is by clearing land. Without access to expensive equipment, fire is their only accessible way to earn a living.

In 2015, some 130,000 fires burned 2.6 million hectares of land in Indonesia, costing the country \$16 billion, according to World Bank estimates — about double the cost of the 2004 tsunami and 1.8 percent of the country's GDP.

The estimate includes losses to agriculture, forestry, transport, trade, industry, tourism and other sectors.

The haze may also have caused 90,000 early deaths in Indonesia and thousands more in Singapore and Malaysia, according to researchers at Harvard and Columbia universities in the United States.

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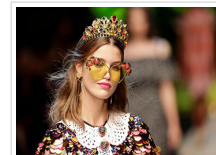
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The haze affected the health of some 43 million people in Indonesia, with 500,000 diagnosed with respiratory tract infections. An estimated 1.7 billion tons of greenhouse gases from the fires amounted to more than what Germany, Japan and the rest of Indonesia emit in any given year.

In Singapore, the cloud of pollution increased healthcare costs, led to the closure of schools and businesses, and may have hit tourism. The pollution spread to Malaysia and made its way north to Bangkok, in Thailand. Some airports shut down for days. Smoke from Kalimantan, the Indonesian part of Borneo, made its way to nearby Brunei.

Almost a year after that devastating environmental catastrophe, the push is on to contain both the burning and the haze. And efforts in Indonesia are being supported by other countries across the region.

Speaking to China Daily Asia Weekly, Lee Chen Chen, director of policy programs at the Singapore Institute of International Affairs (SIIA), said: "Just last month (Indonesia) agreed with the rest of the ASEAN countries on a road map to control the haze problem under the ASEAN Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution.

"This agreement is a long time coming but it shows that the government is willing to work within existing regional structures to tackle the haze problem."

Members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations signed the agreement in 2002 as a result of the haze issues stemming from fires in Indonesia in the late 1990s.

Indonesia finally ratified the agreement in 2014. The burning and subsequent haze have been issues since at least 1997. That year, the World Bank estimated that the haze cost the region some US\$9 billion.

For its part, Indonesia has taken measures to reduce the amount of farming carried out on peat land, eliminate the use of fire to clear land, stop granting concessions to produce palm oil and punish companies linked to starting fires.

Indonesia also set up a Peatland Restoration Agency (BRG) in January to restore some 2 million hectares of peat land by 2020.

"While we have yet to see real results from BRG, it is still early days and the fact that it was even established, again shows that President (Joko 'Jokowi' Widodo) is sincere in tackling this problem," said Lee.

According to the World Bank, as Indonesia works to cut down on burning and restore its valuable peat lands, it may be able to draw lessons from work done elsewhere — most notably China's successful push to rehabilitate the Loess Plateau, which had suffered from deforestation and desertification.

The World Bank has helped with a US\$22 million grant in May to strengthen the management of Indonesia's tropical forests.

Arief Wijaya, climate and forests manager with the Indonesian unit of the World Resources Institute, said that since last year, the Indonesian government has been taking this issue more seriously, especially forest fires.

"The government actually involved the local police force and the army to put out the fires," Wijaya said. "Once the fire is on the ground, a field team will be sent out to the areas where the hot spots are indicated. Law enforcement in Indonesia is much more strengthened."

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A Malaysian flag flutters in front of the prime minister's office in Kuala Lumpur on Oct 23 last year. The severe haze last year in Southeast Asia is estimated by one study to have caused 90,000 early deaths in Indonesia and thousands more in Singapore and Malaysia. (AFP)

This summer, courts in Indonesia handed out the largest fines ever to a company involved in burning. National Sago Prima, a division of Indonesia's Sampoerna Agro conglomerate, was hit with US\$81 million in fines relating to fires from 2014.

The burning of forests on peat lands is a huge concern because peat is an enormous depository of carbon. When peat dries up and burns, all the carbon dioxide stored in the ground is released.

Indonesia has an estimated 15 to 20 million hectares of tropical peat land, storing 60 trillion tons of carbon. Protecting these reserves is now a key component of the work of the BRG, whose first goal is to restore 2 million hectares of peat land by 2020.

This is no easy task, but the man appointed by Jokowi to head up the BRG, Nazir Foead, is confident that the task is doable.

For starters, Foead noted that there are 2.1 million hectares of peat land controlled by domestic and multinational corporations and held under concessions.

"If the government really guides and supervises the corporations effectively in doing peat restoration, we will reach 2.1 million hectares by 2020 with companies alone doing it."

And then there are 300,000 hectares in conservation areas that fall under the responsibility of conservation authorities, which the government has responsibility for.

"If you add that up, we have already reached 2.4 million hectares," Foead said.

This may sound easy, but the work that lies ahead is massive.

Key to preserving peat lands is water. The peat has to be moist, even waterlogged. If it is wet, it cannot burn but it can store plenty of carbon. This means that the water table in some seven provinces will have to be controlled.

"It will be a massive operation by building maybe thousands of dams to block the canals, but these dams have to be constructed in a way that they can be controlled," Foead said.

"I'm very optimistic from all the support that I received from Indonesia and international partners," he added. "It is one of the most ambitious restoration projects globally."

However, these efforts may not be enough, said Wijaya of the World Resources Institute. "Yes, law enforcement has strengthened but it's certainly not efficient," he said.

"Say, as a company, 10,000 hectares of land is given to you. In reality, out of 10,000 hectares, only 75 percent can be utilized. Twenty-five percent is already claimed by local people or under dispute. De facto, it isn't under the corporation. This is why when the fire starts it becomes a challenge to see if the fire was set by the local people or the company.

"Even if they are a private company, if they can prove that they aren't responsible for the fire, they can escape from trials. This is a big problem."

Yuyun Indradi, a political forest campaigner at Greenpeace Indonesia, said the vast majority of plantation companies are not doing enough to prevent landscape fires and haze.

“‘Zero-burning’ policies sound impressive, but do not address the problems created by industrial-scale peat drainage and forest clearing, which create the conditions where small or accidentally lit fires inevitably get out of control,” Indradi said.

Just this month, Indonesia’s Riau Andalan Pulp and Paper violated the new peat land moratorium and got a simple verbal warning. No sanctions were issued. Rather, Indonesia’s Ministry of Environment and Forestry advised the company to resolve the dispute between the company and the locals.

“Some companies in Indonesia, maybe mainboard (listed) companies, have not adopted practices and they’re also involved in inappropriate land clearing,” said Faizal Parish, director of the Malaysia-based Global Environment Centre.

On the brighter side, Indonesia is not alone in its efforts as other countries are getting involved in fighting fires and developing stronger policies.

Malaysia helped out last year with a Bombardier water-bomber aircraft and Singapore provided a Chinook helicopter along with troops from the Singapore Armed Forces and the Singapore Civil Defence Force to assist. Russia stationed a large Beriev Be-200 water-bomber aircraft in Indonesia’s Pangkal Pinang.

Countries as far away as Norway and Canada have also gotten involved to help Indonesia restore peat lands and cut down on the burning.

Singapore is now looking at prosecuting companies that cause haze problems in Indonesia in its own courts through its Transboundary Haze Pollution Act (THPA).

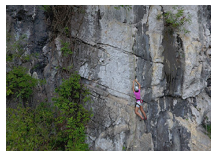
The law has increased tensions with Jakarta but Singapore insists it is trying to support the Indonesian government, not encroach on its jurisdiction.

“Investigations are still ongoing, so it is hard for us to quantify the full impact of the THPA at this juncture,” said the SIIA’s Lee. “It was definitely invoked for the first time last year at the heart of the haze crisis.

“It serves as a strong deterrent because, for companies to even be investigated under the THPA, that increases reputational and legal risk for companies and that is not something the companies want to be involved in.”



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