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## Fighting the flames together

THE rain last Sunday helped lift the haze and improve the Air Pollutant Index nationwide for a while. The index went up again swiftly in the evening. The same cycle has been repeated over the past few weeks. As long as we are dependent on rain to dispel the haze, relief will only be temporary. For a more definite solution, Malaysia needs to mobilise all efforts towards this goal. The Government, private sector and the people must tackle the problem at its source - the forest fires in Indonesia - and take every measure to stop activities that might worsen the haze.

Although identifying the source of the forest fires was simplified by the availability of satellite pictures, a vast country like Indonesia may face difficulties in containing the fires. Add to this the currency and share market turmoil in the region and it will become crystal clear that any help will be greatly appreciated. The Malaysian Government has said that it is prepared to assist its neighbour by sending personnel to fight the fires, although certain parties have argued that this should have been done a long time ago. Now that the "green light" has been given, it is hoped that the haze's days are numbered.

However, efforts to contain the forest fires should not be shouldered by the Government alone. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs), who have been crying for swifter action, should initiate efforts to help contain the fires. Rather than merely talking and doing nothing, the NGOs should work together to keep the flames at bay. Constructive criticism includes offering ideas on how a problem can be resolved; the least the NGOs can do, given their extensive global networks, is to convince their counterparts in developed countries that this is a time for action, not words.

The private sector should also come forward. Businesses, after all, are among the most affected by the haze. When Sarawak declared a state of emergency last week, factories stopped their machines and offices had to close. This is money lost and opportunities wasted. Within the private sector, no one is expected to help more than the Malaysian plantation companies said to be responsible for some of the fires. Sadly however, only one company has responded to the Government's call to assist the Indonesian authorities although there are 18 Malaysian plantation companies operating in Indonesia, including those involved in joint ventures with Indonesian counterparts. As Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said, these companies should take immediate action to put out the forest fires because the plantations need to be protected. Furthermore, these firms should have a sense of obligation to help since they were given the chance to operate plantations in Indonesia.

In tackling the forest fires at the earliest stage, perhaps Malaysia can share its experience in setting up voluntary fire fighting units, especially in remote and rural areas with Indonesia. Under this voluntary fire fighting scheme, the Government provides the necessary fire fighting equipment and machines to the local people, while they (local people) manage the units. Although they may not be as skilled as professional fireman, these voluntary fire fighters, who receive training from the Fire Services Department, will be able to contain the fire and prevent it from spreading. In a vast country like Indonesia, a voluntary fire fighting unit can aid in containing bush fires and preventing a haze from spreading throughout the region.

In this regard, the corporate sector can also contribute by donating fire engines and equipment to the voluntary units. Perhaps the Malaysian plantation companies can also have their own voluntary fire fighting units set up within their premises. They may have to allocate extra expenditure in their company's budget but think of it as a saviour to millions of people who are currently experiencing a choking experience due to haze. They may "burn" some money doing this, but it will at least be for a good cause.

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