

31/07/1997

Forest fires in Sumatra cause of the haze (HL)

Esther Tan

KUALA LUMPUR, Wed. - Forest fires in Sumatra have been identified as the cause of the haze enveloping Malaysia the past few weeks, reminiscent of the 1994 situation when the country's air quality deteriorated to hazardous levels.

Science, Technology and Environment Minister Datuk Law Hieng Ding said today the southwesterly wind was blowing the smoke from Sumatra to Malaysia.

In 1994, Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei were shrouded in haze for three months from August due to forest fires in Sumatra and Kalimantan. The incident caused air quality to reach a hazardous level at one stage.

Law said images from the United States National Oceanographic Atmospheric Administration Satellite revealed many "hot spots" in Sumatra.

"The Asean Specialised Meteorological Centre in Singapore has confirmed that these images matched the details (on forest fires) it had obtained," he told reporters after today's Cabinet meeting.

Reports obtained by ASMC and the Malaysian Meteorological Services Department showed that the visibility level in Central Java has also been reduced drastically to less than a kilometre.

"Even the Indonesian Environment Minister was reported to have urged plantation and logging companies to control or reduce forest burning in the country.

"There are also shifting cultivation activities which, more or less, are causing the problem," said Law.

According to an AFP/DPA report which quoted the Jakarta Post today, the Indonesian authorities have advised plantation and forestry companies to halt forest fires in Borneo and Sumatra.

Indonesian Environment Minister Sarwono Kusumaatmadya was reported as saying that Singapore, Malaysia and Brunei had filed complaints as the thick smoke was disrupting air traffic.

Sarwono had said that so far this year, fires have destroyed 9,233 hectares of forest.

He said only 10 per cent of the fires was believed to have been caused by traditional slash and burn harvesting and land clearing methods.

The rest of the controlled forest burning was done by large forestry and plantation companies and the Government-sponsored transmigration programme.

There were also reports of forest and bush fires in Kalimantan last month.

Law who briefed the Cabinet on the haze today, said he would contact his Indonesian counterpart immediately to express the Government's concern about the transboundary pollution.

He said Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has suggested the hiring of water bombers as a precautionary measure during dry spells.

Dr Mahathir also suggested asking for expert help from other countries such as the US and Canada.

Law said it was not advisable to buy a water bomber because of the high cost involved. Furthermore, the aircraft was not needed throughout the year.

There was a plan to buy a water bomber from a Canadian company last year but this was shelved due to high cost. Each water bomber cost about US\$18 million (about RM47 million).

Asked why Malaysia should hire the water bomber instead of Indonesia since the forest fires mostly occurred across the Straits of Malacca, Law said: "We will try to work something out."

He said the relevant ministers including Information Minister Datuk Mohamed Rahmat and Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi were asked to raise the matter with their counterparts in the region.

"We have to find a solution together because the problem affects the region," he said.

Law said Malaysia would raise the issue at a dialogue between Malaysian and Indonesian officials next month.

"We will discuss how we can overcome the problem together and whether we need outside funding," he said.

On today's condition, Law said visibility level has been greatly reduced in some parts of the country.

Severe haze was reported in Butterworth and Seberang Prai where the visibility level has been reduced to between one and two kilometres.

The visibility level in Perlis, Chuping, Langkawi and Alor Star was three kilometres while in Penang, it was five kilometres.

In Perak and Pahang, the visibility level was reduced to four kilometres and in Kuching, between two and four kilometres.

Under the Malaysian Air Quality Index, the air quality in most parts of the country was categorised as moderate.

The air quality reading in Kuala Lumpur was 83, Petaling Jaya, 67, Gombak and Seberang Prai, 91, Klang and Sungai Petani, 81, Nilai 82, Ipoh, 79, Kuching, 82, Shah Alam, 66, Kajang, 67 and Johor Baru, 53.

The air quality in Kuantan, Kemaman, Jerantut and Kota Baru was good.

(END)