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Seeing through the haze clearly

FOR weeks now Malaysians have talked about nothing but the ringgit, the stock market and the haze. Prices of shares have stabilised somewhat and everyone has found out they are still alive despite the weaker ringgit. But the haze has taken over our lives. The air we breathe gets worse by the day, sunshine no longer greets us in the morning, and the blue skies have dissapeared. The moment Malaysians dreaded came yesterday, when Sarawak declared a state of emergency because the haze level throughout the state climbed above 600 points, far higher than the designated "dangerous" level on the Air Pollutant Index (API) scale.

The cause of the haze is no secret; President Suharto has already apologised publicly to other countries in the region for the raging forest fires that have caused the blanket of misty unhealthy smog. Malaysia appreciates Suharto's gesture and would like to help. Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad even asked two Malaysian plantation companies said to be responsible for some of the fires in Indonesia to help put out the fires. The Association of South-East Asian Nations environment ministers have met in Jakarta to find ways to jointly fight the fires. Contrary to some reports, the haze is not just Malaysia's problem; its cover over the region includes Singapore, Indonesia, the Brunei, and will widen and thicken unless the authorities do something quick and effective to douse the fires eating up forests and plantations.

It is too early to assess the economic impact of the haze - people are more concerned, and rightfully so, with the effects on their health. The respiratory-mask is both the best-selling item in most supermarkets and the latest fashion statement, but these same supermarkets also have fewer customers. Restaurants and public places will continue to lose patrons. Airlines have had to cancel or reschedule flights and many holidaymakers are altering plans and heading away from Kuala Lumpur, Bali and Phuket. What happens if the haze gets so bad that factories and offices have to close down? Are there provisions that say the workers must be paid? Even Human Resources Minister Datuk Lim Ah Lek has not thought about this. He said he was sure that Malaysian employers and workers could work something out if it really comes to that.

But what's more sure at this point is the countries affected in this region need assistance - expert assistance - to bring the fires in Indonesia under control. What's also certain, is that none is immediately forthcoming. Three years ago, when the haze first hit the country and Dr Mahathir called on the environmentally-obsessed West to extend their expertise in fighting forest fires, many environmentalists thought that Malaysia wanted to pull wool over their eyes, that the real cause for the haze was the country's rapid development, the lack of regulations to punish polluting factories, the two-stroke engines of small motorcycles, open burning and the fact that there were just too many cars. The Government has addressed every one of these possibilities, and the haze is here again.

And - surprise, surprise - when one can hear better than one can see in this haze, environmentalists have been rather mute or if they had said something, rather inaudible. Are they also at a loss as to how they should tackle the smog of South-East Asia? Or are they less concerned because it is happening here and not in Europe or America? Why are they not pressing their governments to extend the necessary assistance, expertise and

equipment needed to fight the fires? Apart from the French - who were also in Kuala Lumpur in 1993 to help us deal with the Highland Towers tragedy - no one has come forth with help. Perhaps they quite happy that with the fire, less tropical timber will find its way to their markets and homes? The haze may block our vision, hurt our throats and irritate our nostrils, but it has also given us a clearer picture of what these so-called environmentalists truly are. And if we think we should wait for their governments to help, we'd have better luck waiting for the fire to die out by itself.

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