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Haze clouds out any gains on environment front

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ACHIEVEMENTS on the environment front, if any, turned hazy in 1997 when thick smog shrouded the country and many parts of the region for most of the second half.

Once again, forest fires in Indonesia were identified as the cause, this time exacerbated by the El Nino South-East Oscillation, a phenomenon that occurs every two or five years which results in a global shift of warm air and consequently trade winds and ocean currents.

In July, when the haze first rolled in, it was reminiscent of the 1994 situation with the country's air quality suddenly turning poor. But no one expected the Air Pollutant Index (API) to touch the 500-mark, let alone rise beyond 800.

Kuching gained particular notoriety by being the first city in the country to be put on "Early Alert 2" under the haze action plan - formulated by the National Committee on the haze.

This was followed by a state of emergency being declared in Sarawak by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad on September 19, when the API breached the 500-level in Kuching.

And as the API climbed further, at one point to as high as 839 in Kuching, evacuation was even considered. Fortunately, there was no need for such an exercise as the API edged lower subsequently.

Still, it was reported that the 10-day emergency had cost the state a total of RM1 billion, with the tourism industry particularly badly hit. Hotels, for example, saw their average occupancy rate plunge to 30 per cent.

In addition, a total of 890 F50 and B737 Malaysia Airlines domestic flights were cancelled in September, with the Kuching, Sibul, Bintulu and Miri airports having to close to all operations for a number of days towards the end of the month.

To address the problem, cloud-seeding operations were conducted and the city folk were advised to car pool. Developers were also told to take steps to ensure that construction work did not result in kicking up dust clouds that would worsen the situation.

In addition, some 1,200 Malaysian firemen were sent to help put out the forest fires in Kalimantan and Sumatra. Thankfully, the rains, though delayed, finally came. The flames were doused and the air cleansed.

While the haze was particularly bad this year, it has to be recognised that it is still a seasonal and episodic problem, and so is the El Nino phenomenon. Air pollution on the other hand is not.

This means that efforts to maintain clean air and clear skies must come in the form of more than mere reactive and largely ad-hoc measures. Implementation and enforcement too have to be stressed.

The 1996 Environmental Quality Report showed that motor vehicles were a major contributor to air pollution, emitting 2.4 million tonnes of carbon monoxide, 457,900 tonnes of nitrogen oxide and 19,000 tonnes of particulates into the environment during the year.

Current measures, for example in the case of Kuching, included load-shedding by industry and a switch to low-sulphur content fuel, requiring manufacturers to make intermittent adjustments.

This highlights the need for long-term strategies such as the Clean Air Action Plan which was formulated in 1994, based on the findings of a RM10 million joint study by the Department of Environment and the Japan

International Cooperation Agency.

The study concluded that air quality in the Klang Valley would worsen by the year 2005 if steps were not taken to ease traffic congestion and compel industries to switch to more environment-friendly fuels.

It has been decided that the plan would be implemented "in stages".

The year however ended on a positive note with Asean Environment Ministers adopting a regional action plan which set out definite programmes to address the haze problem, principally to boost the grouping's capability to detect and monitor forest fires, and for quick action. More importantly, fire prevention is a key objective.

Called the Regional Haze Action Plan, it will be implemented by March next year.

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