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HEADLINE: Malaysia gags research reports on smog

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Malaysia has banned academics from painting a gloomy picture of the country's smog problem because this could stop foreigners from coming to the country.

Najib Tun Razak, education minister, said yesterday the gag order was imposed to prevent "speculative" reports from researchers. He cited one which claimed that breathing the smoggy air was equivalent to smoking 40 cigarettes a day - an estimate with which many doctors concur.

"Painting such a picture could give a negative image of **Malaysia**, causing a scare among Malaysians and preventing foreigners from coming to the country," he said. The smog, which has now thinned somewhat, is being generated by forest fires in Indonesia.

Mr Najib said that in future any academic research relating to the smog would have to be submitted to higher authorities for approval. This was to prevent them being manipulated by the foreign media to blacken the country's image.

Malaysia Airlines, which has seen incoming load factors drop by as much as 15 per cent, has resorted to some unusual strategies such as giving free tickets to journalists to come and see for themselves that **Malaysia's** smog was not as bad as reported, executives said.

But the local media has also given the issue blanket coverage, in spite of chiding from politicians that this was costing the country tourist dollars.

Yesterday, human rights activists were up in arms at what they perceived as a blow to civil liberties.

Others saw a conflict between the gag order and the government's huge project to build a 750 sq km "multimedia super corridor" in the image of California's Silicon Valley. "This is absolutely ridiculous. They talk so much about wanting a free media because of the multimedia super corridor and yet they suppress this," said Fan Yew Teng, a writer and former member of parliament.

Meanwhile, in Indonesia, at least 30 cities were covered by thick smog yesterday. "Zero visibility was reported in Jambi [on Sumatra island]. . . In general, the smog persists," said an official at Jakarta's smog control bureau.

An official at the Aeronautics and Space Office said yesterday that the rainy season, now expected to start at least two months late in December or January, would not necessarily mean an end to the smog problem. "I think the rains will produce more smog. It's just like pouring water on burning coal. It will produce smoke."

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