

Indonesia Must Be More Earnest In Its Efforts To Resolve Haze Crisis, Say Academics

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KUALA LUMPUR (Bernama) -- Indonesia must set out earnestly to eliminate the root causes of the haze as only through its sincere efforts and commitment can the issue be resolved permanently, say academics.

They say the haze will be here to stay if the republic continues to give its neighbours the impression that it lacks the "burning desire" and political will to settle the issue once and for all.

Last week Indonesia, which had earlier insisted that it did not need international help to douse forest fires raging in Sumatera and Kalimantan, finally decided to seek the help of other countries to extinguish the fires, which had caused widespread haze in Southeast Asia.

Indonesian President Joko Widodo had earlier said that his country would need about three years to overcome the haze as it was in the process of building water reserves and canals in the forests to get water to the hotspots, while also making progress to enforce laws against forest-burning.

However, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak, who met Joko in Jakarta on Sunday, said the three-year wait was "too long" as it would mean that Malaysia would be forced to face the haze for "three more years".

Pointing out that the haze was threatening the interests of Malaysians and disrupting economic, social and educational activities, including leisure and sports events, Najib said Indonesia was prepared to study Malaysia's suggestion that tube wells be used to fight peat soil fires in plantation areas.

Will Indonesia adhere to its promise to make a more concerted effort to wipe out the haze menace?

SOLUTION IN THE HANDS OF INDONESIA

Where there is a will, there is a way, so says geostrategy expert Asso Prof Dr Azmi Hassan, who is attached to Universiti Teknologi Malaysia's Institute of Geospatial Science and Perdana School of Science, Technology and Innovation Policy.

He said like Indonesia, Malaysia too has an extensive acreage of land under plantations, but open burning was minimal due to its stringent laws and enforcement.

"Compared with Indonesia, our plantations are managed in a more systematic manner," he told Bernama. In the republic, the fires are mainly caused by illegal land-clearing, as well as

slash-and-burn, activities in plantations.

He said Indonesia should prove that it was sincere in its intention to put an end to the annual smog that enveloped its neighbours by coming up with a concrete action plan.

"It's entirely in its hands how it plans to go about resolving the issue... it will be pointless to talk about resolving the crisis as long as Indonesia doesn't have a proper plan or effective laws to do so.

"It could have made a firm commitment to tackle the haze issue as far back as 1997 but it didn't do so," he said.

INDONESIANS SHOULD PUT PRESSURE ON GOVERNMENT

Azmi said the people of Indonesia should put pressure on their government to resolve the smog issue quickly as it was "choking" them as well.

"The Indonesian government may view the matter lightly in the absence of political pressure. But once the people start griping about it, then it may have political implications and when this happens, there's a better chance for their complaints to be heard," he said.

He also said that under the ASEAN pact, member nations could offer to help Indonesia fight the forest fires.

"But Indonesia had in the past rejected their offers, supposedly because the help that they had offered was short term in nature. However, I believe that it (the rejection) has something to do with prestige issues.

"Nevertheless, extending a helping hand each time the haze strikes is not enough to fix the problem... it's Indonesia which has to take the necessary action," he added.

Head of the National Council of Professors' Political, Security and International Affairs Cluster Prof Datuk Dr Mohamed Mustafa Ishak said Indonesia was not amenable to outside assistance earlier probably because it really could cope on its own or it did not like other countries interfering in its affairs.

NOT GOOD ENOUGH

"Clearly, what they (Indonesia) need is proper regulatory control and more stringent enforcement of the law to prevent the occurrence of open burning.

"Of course, Indonesia doesn't want to be perceived as weak but then, it is not the neighbouring countries' intention to interfere...all they want to do is extend a helping hand as Indonesia's internal problems are causing much difficulty to their own populations," he said.

He felt that the measures taken so far by the republic to combat the haze were "not good enough", which gave the impression that Indonesia was not being earnest enough in its efforts to contain the crisis.

While there have been suggestions that Malaysia take legal action against the plantation companies said to be responsible for the fires in Indonesia, there have also been demands for Indonesia to compensate Malaysia for losses it had incurred from the haze.

Mohamed Mustafa said although Malaysia could seek compensation or resort to legal action, "how sure are we that their laws would be favourable to us?"

"We can take legal action but we have to do it in Indonesia and will, therefore, be subject to their laws. Even the Malaysian-owned plantation companies there are subject to their laws.

"Taking legal action will be a complex and complicated affair, more so if the Indonesian authorities don't cooperate," he said, adding that the best platform to raise the matter would be ASEAN, which is chaired by Malaysia this year.

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