

Indonesia thanks Najib for 'proactive' attitude in smoke crisis
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Indonesia has welcomed the attitude of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak, who called on Indonesian President Joko Widodo to discuss and make proposals on resolving the problems of forest and estate fires in the country.

Indonesian Vice-President Jusuf Kalla said the other neighbouring countries should emulate Najib's attitude instead of merely criticising because Indonesia itself was struggling to end the smoke problem.

"Indonesia is thankful to Pak Najib and everyone, there is formal agreement at the Asean level on the (forest and estate) fires... (and) if necessary to resolve the problems together, Indonesia is grateful for the joint efforts.

"Indonesia has endeavoured by mobilising 20 aircraft, five battalions of the armed forces as well as the general public," he said in a recent interview with Bernama.

During his recent visit to Indonesia, Najib held a meeting with Jokowi to discuss the smoke issue and cooperation in the oil palm industry.

During the meeting, the prime minister suggested that Indonesia build tube wells as a measure to control forest fires, as an alternative to Indonesia's original proposal to build canals that would take three years to complete.

Jokowi, who agreed with the proposal, said Indonesia would send its team to study the construction and effectiveness of the tube wells as implemented by Malaysia, especially in Sabah and Sarawak.

Jusuf said the smoke that hit Malaysia and Singapore was caused by the wind and as such, Indonesia could not stop the smoke from affecting other countries.

"The question of the smoke (haze) for Indonesia poses serious problems because most of the people affected are in Sumatera and Kalimantan in Indonesia... we can't control the wind, nature controls the wind and carries the smoke to Singapore and Malaysia," he said.

He said as neighbouring countries, everyone should help each other and that Indonesia had likewise assisted in providing fresh air through its forests to the neighbouring countries.

"As neighbours, we can benefit together, we enjoy whatever is positive and when there are problems, we face them together. If the air is good, we have clean energy, clean weather... Malaysia also benefits from the forest in Indonesia but if there is smoke, what can we do. We work together in good and bad times," he said.

On the activities of local residents in burning estates and forests, the vice-president said although the human factor was the cause of the fire, the problem was made worse by the dry weather.

He said the Indonesian government had long-term plans to overcome the problems of forest fires by restricting the areas for plantations especially on peat soil and would not compromise with the groups who indulged in burning plantations, including companies from Malaysia.

Jusuf said the local population involved in forest and estate fires were the low-income group who could not afford to acquire sophisticated and heavy machinery, and the government had already taken action against them.

"They don't have heavy machinery, no bulldozers, excavators to make the bunds and thus they resort to burning. But this has been prohibited by the police. Many people had been punished, many people are imprisoned each year and many industries too had been fined for resorting to burning," he said.

Indonesia faces the worst smoke yet this year which has lasted more than three months due to open burning.

In several areas such as Palangkaraya and Pontianak in Kalimantan, the air pollutant index (API) had recorded readings which exceeded 2,000 while in Jambi and Riau in Sumatera, API readings exceeded the 1,000 mark.

The thick smog enveloping the region resulted in Malaysia being hit by severe smoke to the extent that the government closed schools in several states in the peninsula. – Bernama, October 28, 2015.

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