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## ASEAN haze deal still faces complications

As the 2011 chair of ASEAN, Indonesia has an ambitious plan to implement a haze agreement this year. But facts from the ground shows that Jakarta is finding it hard to call parties to support the cause. While the House of Representatives has not listed haze ratification as a priority bill to be deliberated, smoke has begun affecting part of Sumatra Island. About 500 fire spots in North Sumatra, Riau and Jambi have limited sight at Polonia Airport, North Sumatra, over the past few days.

“[People’s line of sight] has reduced to less than 3,000 meters now when it should be at 5,000 meters,” said Firman, the head of the Meteorological and Geophysics Agency’s division at the airport.

Reduced sight has caused the delay of several flights to Pekanbaru, Riau.

Indonesia is the largest forest nation in ASEAN with some 120 million hectares of rainforest. Land and forest fires are normally massive in dry season with its haze reached neighboring nations such as Singapore and Malaysia, making it the only member in the region that has not ratified the haze treaty since it was sanctioned in 2003.

The agreement binds statutory countries to take steps to stop haze pollution from land and forest fires within their territories, through strict regulations, heat-seeking satellites and firefighting training. President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono has set a target to cut 20 percent of hotspots per year.

Forestry Ministry secretary-general Hadi Daryanto said that the government should review its plan to accord the regional treaty if it could not stop forest fires at its core. “It is not big problem to control fires if they occur in plantation areas; the problem is if the fires are lit by the local people,” he said.

Hadi said that the government should engage in discussions with the local government, indigenous people and local communities to settle the case. In South Sumatra, he said, the local people had long practiced *sonar*, the habit of people setting fires to clear land for agriculture purposes.

“We should first upgrade the capacity of the local people in order to avert the practice of clearing land with fires; otherwise a ratification would burden Indonesia,” he said.

ASEAN ministers are holding a two-day meeting in Singapore to discuss the transboundary haze pollution, which began Tuesday.

Before leaving for the meeting, Environment Minister Gusti Muhammad Hatta said a legislation process was key to realizing Jakarta’s commitment to curb haze. “The ratification must be in line with the law; It can’t be made through a presidential decree [as we planned before],” Gusti told reporters.

The legislators rejected the ratification draft in 2008, saying the treaty should mention illegal logging as countries in ASEAN should stop accepting wood taken illegally from Indonesian forests. Heads of states from ASEAN are to gather in Jakarta for a summit this year with the ministers to hold a meeting to discuss haze pollution from forest fires.