

Police dig deeper into forest burning cases

The Riau Police are looking into 30 cases of the slash-and-burn forest clearing in Riau province, with the number of cases surpassing the 18 deforestation cases of 2013.

“As many as 23 of the cases are under investigation, while the remaining seven are still being considered,” National Police spokesperson Sr. Comr. Agus Rianto said on Tuesday in Jakarta.

As of Tuesday, the Riau Police had named 34 individuals as suspects in forest fire cases in 12 regencies and cities in the province. Last year, the police investigated 18 deforestation cases implicating 35 individuals. All the case dossiers have been submitted to the Riau Prosecutor’s Office.

Agus pointed out that among the 30 cases handled this year, one of them implicated a company, which he declined to name. Last month, Coordinating People’s Welfare Minister Agung Laksono said both local and Singaporean companies were responsible for the haze plaguing Sumatra and Singapore.

Agung’s statement sparked diplomatic tensions, with Singapore demanding he show the evidence of the involvement of Singaporean companies or individuals in the forest fires. Meanwhile, in Medan, North Sumatra, the Army’s military police arrested Sgt. Maj. Sudigdo, who is allegedly responsible for the fires in Giam Siak Kecil-Bukit Batu biosphere reserve in Bengkalis, Riau.

Riau Haze Disaster Mitigation Task Force commander Brig. Gen. Prihadi Agus Irianto said Sudigdo had hired some individuals to cut down trees before setting fires.

Prihadi expected the arrest of Sudigdo — who once served in the veteran and disabled soldiers administration office in Dumai, Riau — would help the Riau Police locate more suspects, identified as Udin, Giran and Buyung, who were accused of fencing illegal timber from Sudigdo.

In response to the heavy haze that continues to effect Riau, the provincial administration has decided to prolong the disaster preparedness and response phase for an undetermined period.

The Sumatra Environment Laboratory recorded that 10 of 12 spots in Riau had an air quality index above 300 on the Pollutant Standards Index (PSI), which is considered hazardous.

“Some of the spots recorded hazardous air quality for 11 consecutive days. Thus, the disaster response phase, which was scheduled to end on Wednesday, will be extended,” Riau province official Abdul Latief said in Pekanbaru.

Meanwhile, the stifling haze also forced Payakumbuh, a West Sumatran city adjacent to Riau, to temporarily close schools, affecting around 43,000 students on Tuesday and Wednesday.

“We will observe the conditions in the days to come, to decide whether we will open the schools or not,” Payakumbuh Mayor Riza Falepi told The Jakarta Post.

Meanwhile, the air quality in Jambi is improving although it is still considered unhealthy. The Jambi Environment Agency (BLHD) on Tuesday recorded 111 PSI in Jambi had harmful levels of pollution, compared to 116 PSI a day before.

“The weather category is still the same — unhealthy,” Jambi BLHD head Lies Indriyani said.