

S'pore haze fears mount as Riau fires rage on

Fears that haze triggered by forest fires in Riau, Indonesia, will reach Singapore are mounting, as the number of hot spots across Sumatra increases. Singapore Environment and Water Resources Minister Vivian Balakrishnan said on his Facebook account on Tuesday night that 458 hot spots were visible and haze might worsen when winds weakened next week.

“We will try to encourage them to take action, but we all know the welfare of close neighbors is not their priority. [These are the] hard truths of regional politics,” Balakrishnan said. As of Wednesday, Antara news agency reported 243 hot spots in Riau, 74 in North Sumatra, 40 in West Sumatra and 75 in Aceh.

Earlier, a National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) satellite reported hot spots in Riau had increased sharply from 30 in early January to 248 in early February. The government is aware that an early start to the dry season may result in prolonged periods of haze in the archipelago, and is thus strengthening cooperation with localities to help tackle fires.

Forestry Ministry secretary-general Hadi Daryanto said the ministry had urged local leaders to closely monitor the number of hot spots on a daily basis and douse fires immediately. “We have also deployed Manggala Agni firefighting teams to fire-prone areas to handle forest fires. They have been working with communities as well so we are quite well prepared [to face fires],” Hadi told The Jakarta Post.

The ministry has allocated Rp 1.5 trillion (US\$124.5 million) to forest-fire management this year and has called on other departments and companies to follow. Hadi, however, could not guarantee that the haze would not reach Singapore given that an incoming tropical cyclone could blow the haze toward the city state.

National Disaster Management Board (BNPB) spokesman Sutopo Purwo Nugroho said the BNPB was collaborating with the Indonesian Military (TNI), the National Police, Manggala Agni, the Public Order Agency (Satpol PP) and local disaster mitigation agencies (BPBDs) to handle forest fires.

Sutopo also said the board planned to conduct water bombing if fires reached a dangerous level. The plan is to charter an amphibious BE-200 and a Kamov helicopter from Russia for the water bombing.

Worsening air quality in a number of regions in Riau has seen thousands suffer from acute respiratory tract infections (ARTIs).

In Dumai, Riau, air pollution has reached an alarming level, with the Ambient Air Quality Monitoring program showing the level of pollution to have reached 449 on the Pollutant Standards Index (PSI).

“Particles including fine dust carried by wind and haze are very hazardous to human health and people are extremely susceptible to ARTIs,” said Dumai health office head Marjoko Santoso.

Ever since haze from forest and peatland fires appeared, 670 people have been recorded as suffering from ARTIs in Dumai.

The number of patients is predicted to rise further as the haze has not shown signs of receding.

“Dumai health office has distributed 40,000 masks through puskesmas [community health centers] in every district to motorcyclists and pedestrians,” said Marjoko.

He also advised members of the public to minimize outdoor activities. But for those who had to work outdoors, he suggested always wearing masks and drinking plenty of water to minimize the direct affects of the hot weather and haze, such as dehydration.

“Those with a history of lung infections, heart problems, as well as the elderly and toddlers, should remain indoors and tightly shut doors and windows to minimize air pollution,” he said.