

## **Joint military, police teams to tackle forest fires**

In their latest attempt to tackle forest fires, the Riau Police have deployed special teams to find those individuals responsible for illegally felling trees and setting fire to land and forests in the province.

Riau Police chief Brig. Gen. Condro Kirono said on Wednesday he had formed nine special teams, each consisting of 50 to 70 individuals from the police, the Army, the Air Force and the Riau Prosecutor's Office.

"Police and soldiers will be armed during the operation. This creates a deterrent effect for those conducting slash-and-burn forest clearing," said Condro, the Riau Haze Disaster Mitigation Task Force deputy commander, in Pekanbaru.

The operation will last for 14 days, but Condro pointed out the possibility of extending it until the illegal activities were dealt with.

"The teams' focus in the next two weeks is enforcement, giving shock therapy and awareness. Anyone who is caught burning land or committing illegal logging, be it individuals or firms, will be dealt with at the crime scene right away," he explained.

He said four of the nine teams would observe peatlands in Teluk Meranti subdistrict, Pelalawan.

"Initially, the four teams were intended to operate at Tesso Nilo nature reserve, but this is now under the watch of task force personnel. So we shifted the operation to Teluk Meranti, one of worst-hit areas in Pelalawan," he explained.

He added that the remaining five teams had been tasked with protecting Giam Siak Kecil-Bukit Batu biosphere reserve in Bengkalis, Riau.

The conservation, a 705,271 hectare area of land spanning Bengkalis regency to Siak regency, is home to 29 endangered species, including the Sumatran elephant and the Sumatran tiger. However, timber thieves are still targeting the province's natural treasures.

Last year, a soldier identified as chief Sgt. Sudigdo was arrested for running an illegal logging and land burning business at the reserve.

"The Army chief of staff does not want any soldier to be involved in any crime, moreover environmental crime. He [Sudigdo] has been arrested, interrogated and now he is standing trial in a military court," Army spokesperson Brig. Gen. Andika Perkasa said late on Tuesday.

Andika clarified the previous statement of Riau Haze Disaster Mitigation Task Force commander Brig. Gen. Prihadi Agus Irianto, suggesting Sudigdo had been arrested in North Sumatra on Monday.

On Wednesday morning, the hotspots detected in Sumatra soared to 2,390, with 2,046 hotspots in Riau, according to the Pekanbaru Meteorology, Climatology and Geophysics Agency (BMKG).

"A day before, the hotspots in Sumatra were 131, 63 of which were located in Riau," Pekanbaru BMKG data and information head Slamet Riyadi said.

Slamet attributed the soaring number of hotspots to the dry season. The Pekanbaru BMKG predicted that no rain would fall in Riau in the next 24-hours until Thursday morning.

"The potential of forest fires is still high. Riau is still shrouded by haze that reduced visibility to between 100 and 1,000 meters in the morning," he added.