

Six nabbed for burning forests in Riau

Police have arrested six people for allegedly burning forested land in Bengkalis, Indragiri Hilir and Pekanbaru, Riau province, as thickening haze reached an alarming level.

“They were caught red-handed while burning to clear land,” Riau Police chief Brig. Gen. Condro Kirono said on Thursday. The suspects have been identified only as MS alias OT; NS; P; SW, and two men with the initials YS.

Condro said the police had also questioned 13 witnesses, including residents and employees of PT National Sago Prima, due to suspicions that the fires, which have destroyed thousands of hectares of sago plantations in Meranti Islands regency, were caused by the company’s negligence.

“We are still collecting evidence,” he added. These six arrests have added to the number of suspects allegedly involved in starting forest fires in the province. Last year, police arrested 33 people over forest fires that broke out between June and July. Two of the suspects were Malaysians who worked as managers at a plantation company; they are now standing trial at the Pelalawan District Court.

Meanwhile, the Dumai municipal administration in Riau has declared an alert status for the haze caused by the latest fires. “The alert status has been declared because the air quality in Dumai is very poor and could be a danger to human health and the environment,” Dumai Deputy Mayor Agus Widayat said Thursday as quoted by Antara.

Separately, the Siak Education Agency has instructed schools in the regency to have their students join mass prayers to ask for rain.

The agency previously decided to send students home from school because of the haze. But some schools, including in Sungai Apit and Minas districts, have reopened as conditions have improved.

Data from the Siak Disaster Mitigation Agency (BPBD) reveals that fires in the regency have affected 376.5 hectares of forest and land. The Riau Health Agency has reported that nearly 1,500 people have suffered acute respiratory infections due to the haze.

Meanwhile, the Agriculture Ministry’s director general for husbandry, Gamal Nasir, said nine provinces were considered prone to forest and land fires due to climatic factors.

The nine provinces were Riau, Aceh, South Kalimantan, Jambi, East Kalimantan, Central Kalimantan, West Kalimantan, North Sumatra and South Sumatra.

He called on everyone to be cautious regarding forest and land fires as this year, the dry season was predicted to be longer than last year’s. Condro said the government should rent or buy a BE-200 aircraft to fight the worsening fires in Riau, particularly as other measures, such as weather modification, water bombing and arresting alleged firestarters, had so far proved ineffective.

“A BE-200 is the only solution,” Condro said on Thursday. He said it would be better if the billions of rupiah in funds allocated to extinguish the fires were used to rent or buy the Russian-made aircraft, which is capable of carrying 20 tons of water per flight. The aircraft, he said, was once used to extinguish forest and land fires in 2008. “It turned out a success because it was capable of pouring out water until it seeped beneath the surface of the peatland,” Condro said.

On Tuesday, Singapore’s Environment and Water Resources Minister Vivian Balakrishnan posted on his Facebook account the increasing number of hotspots in Sumatra, which could worsen and affect the city-state. Riau province borders Singapore and Malaysia and it is separated from the two by the Malacca Strait.

Out of the total 458 hotspots in Sumatra, 243 are in Riau, 74 in North Sumatra, 75 in Aceh and 40 in West Sumatra.