

Tens of thousands sick due to haze

The severe haze, which has blanketed Riau and other provinces in Sumatra over the past two months, has taken its toll on locals as thousands across the island suffer from various haze-related illnesses as the air quality continues to deteriorate.

According to Antara news agency, the Riau Health Agency recorded on Friday over 55,000 residents with illnesses ranging from acute respiratory infections, pneumonia and skin and eye irritations

The highest number of cases were recorded in Pekanbaru, followed by Rokan Hilir, Bengkalis, Dumai, Rokan Hulu, Siak, Pelalawan, Indragiri Hulu, Indragiri Hilir, Meranti and Kuantan Singingi.

Air pollution standards index (ISPU) equipment installed in Pekanbaru indicated the air quality level had reached 310 on the pollutant standards index (PSI), while the ISPU in Siak regency showed a PSI of 388.

At Dumai city, Duri Camp and Duri Field the ISPU equipment recorded a pollutant level of 500 PSI, in Pekanbaru city the level was 345 PSI, while in Siak Indrapura the pollutant level stood at 500 PSI.

Under normal conditions, the PSI range is between zero and 50, while above 300 is considered hazardous.

“Residents are advised to minimize outdoor activities,” Riau Health Agency Zainal Arifin said as quoted by Antara.

Severe air pollution has prompted expatriates working in a number of companies in Riau to return to their respective countries. Residents, especially pregnant women and children, have also evacuated to a number of areas with better air quality.

Haze has also hit Bengkulu, forcing fishermen to halt their fishing activities due to poor visibility.

In response to the worsening haze situation, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono launched on Friday a three-week integrated operation to combat pervasive forest fires and haze in Riau, with the Indonesian Military (TNI) deploying a brigade of soldiers to put out fires raging across the forests and peatlands.

National Disaster Mitigation Agency (BNPB) head Syamsul Maarif has been tasked with heading the operation.

“The three main objectives of the integrated emergency operation are tackling the fires and haze, providing health services to affected individuals and maintaining law and order,” Yudhoyono said during a teleconference in Central Java Police headquarters in Semarang.

“We have decided that the TNI will add one brigade, made up of two Army battalions, one Marine battalion, and a battalion of Paskhas [Air Force’s special forces] [...] One brigade of soldiers will be enough to manually extinguish the fires,” he added.