

SBY concerned, calls on legal action against forest arsonists

President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY) expressed on Sunday his concern over the perpetual forest and peatland fires in Riau, calling for legal action against those responsible.

"I am ashamed. As President, I'm deeply concerned, a lot of residents are losing sleep at night because of the actions of those irresponsible people," SBY said in a meeting with dozens of residents in Minas area, Siak regency, Riau.

The President revealed that he had received a report that the forest and peatland fires in the province were the result of deliberate actions. He said land concession holders instructed residents to set fire to land to open new plantation areas. "It causes losses to the state and the people are the ones who suffer."

In his visit SBY was accompanied by State Secretary Sudi Silalahi, Coordinating People's Welfare Minister Agung Laksono, Forestry Minister Zulkifli Hasan, Home Minister Gamawan Fauzi, National Police chief Gen. Sutarmanto and Indonesian Military chief Gen. Moeldoko as well as provincial leaders.

Meanwhile, police have named 60 suspects in 40 cases of forest fires in eight regencies and cities across Riau province during their investigations over the last four weeks.

"One of the suspects is from a company in Meranti Islands regency," Riau Police spokesman Adj. Sr. Comr. Guntur Aryo Tejo was quoted as saying by Antara in Pekanbaru on Sunday

Aryo said 18 of the 60 suspects were arrested in relation to cases in Rokan Hilir. He disclosed that police detained 16 suspects in Bengkalis, five suspects in Siak, five in Pelalawan, four in Dumai, three in Pekanbaru, two in Meranti Islands and three in Indragiri Hilir.

The forest and peatland fires in Riau have caused thick haze, which has blanketed the province and other adjacent provinces, such as West Sumatra, as well as neighboring countries Malaysia and Singapore. Earlier, Agung said several Singapore-based companies were among the companies that were allegedly responsible for the fires. Singapore has officially responded to the minister's statement, asking Agung to provide evidence.

The Riau administration has declared an emergency situation and asked the National Disaster Mitigation Agency (BNPB) for assistance, including carrying out cloud seeding. However, heavy rains have since swept across Riau and West Sumatra on Saturday, eliminating the haze and the need to conduct cloud seeding.

The deluge hit the majority of the regencies in the two provinces, including Rokan Hilir, Dumai, Rokan Hulu, Pekanbaru, Kampar, Kuantan Singingi, Indragiri Hulu and Pelalawan. As the visibility increased on Sunday, the Sultan Syarif Kasim II International Airport in Pekanbaru resumed flight operations after being closed for several days.

"This morning, a Lion Air flight bound for Jakarta took off at 6:45 a.m," Airport duty manager, Ibnu Hasan, said. Similarly in Padang, the haze decreased significantly on Sunday due to the heavy rain on Saturday.

"The heavy rain in Riau and Payakumbuh and the light showers in Bukittinggi and Padangpanjang yesterday have certainly improved the situation," coordinator for analysis and prediction at Minangkabau Meteorology, Climatology and Geophysics Agency (BMKG) Rendy Irawadi said.

He said the visibility in Padang reached 900 meters in the morning and increased to 1,700 meters in the afternoon. res," he added.