

Choking haze

The fight to combat forest fires in Riau continues. Rain over the last couple of days may have helped clear the air, but the annual problem of fires and the resulting dense smoke that has spiraled out of control, disrupted flights and threatened people's health is still there.

Last Friday, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono gave officials three weeks to take action – including tackling the fires and haze, providing health services to affected individuals and enforcing the law – to control the fires in the peat-rich province. He also visited the province's capital, Pekanbaru, to inspect several areas affected by the disaster.

Responding to the ongoing forest fires in Riau that have blanketed Sumatra with haze, National Police chief Gen. Sutarnan declared on Saturday the police would shoot on sight anyone involved in land burning activities that resisted arrest.

The central government dispatched planes for cloud seeding and water bombing, along with more than 2,500 soldiers, police and rescuers.

The spreading haze has forced some Riau residents to stay indoors while thousands of others are experiencing various health problems as a result of the deteriorating air quality.

The Riau Health Agency has recorded more than 55,000 residents across the province suffering from haze-related illnesses, from acute respiratory infection and pneumonia to skin and eye irritation. In Pekanbaru alone, 11,260 residents were treated for acute respiratory infection on Saturday.

This year's haze is reportedly the worst since blazes in June last year, when choking haze reached as far as neighboring Singapore and Malaysia. This time around, the haze has also been blamed for disrupting search efforts for the missing Malaysia Airlines jetliner.

Washington-based World Resources Institute, which tracks tree cover change and fires, has warned that fires in Indonesia are more extensive than last year.

Based on NASA's active fire data from Feb. 20 through March 11, the institute detected 3,101 "high confidence" fire alerts across Sumatra, exceeding the 2,643 fire alerts from last June 13 to 30, the peak of last year's haze crisis.

The forest fires and the resulting haze are always blamed on slash-and-burn practices used to clear forested areas for farming, corporate development and oil palm plantations. With the problems identified, the solution – law enforcement – should be the next move.