

'Haze shouldn't burden new president'

President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono has instructed the Riau provincial administration and Haze Disaster Mitigation Task Force to resolve the forest and peatland fire issue by September at the latest.

"Why does it need to be settled before September? Because my term as President will end on Oct. 20. I hope we can do as much as possible to resolve the haze issue so that it doesn't place a burden on the new president and government," Yudhoyono said on Monday, addressing thousands of joint task force personnel at Roesmin Nurjadin Airbase in Pekanbaru, Riau, prior to leaving for Yogyakarta.

After seeking input from various parties, including affected communities and experts, Yudhoyono then laid out plans to mitigate the impact of the forest and peatland fires in Riau, which included extinguishing all the fires, providing health care to victims of the haze and prosecuting arsonists; all of which needs to be implemented no later than April 4.

"The fires must be doused and the haze eradicated. The task force has been instructed to use all available equipment and carry out measures deemed necessary," he said.

Yudhoyono emphasized that legal measures would be conducted firmly and quickly to serve as a deterrent to would-be firestarters and to punish those found guilty of contributing to the haze, which has affected many people, paralyzed transportation and caused both material and psychological damage.

"I hope the police, prosecutors and courts will not be lenient with these irresponsible people," Yudhoyono added.

In response to the President's speech, Riau Governor Annas Maamun said he would summon all regents and mayors from across the province to gather data on devastated forest locations to determine the involvement of individuals or companies in the fires.

"I believe that some companies have taken advantage by using residents to clear land," he said.

Meanwhile, the National Disaster Mitigation Agency (BNPB) said the annual haze was the result of negligence and weak law enforcement.

The BNPB's data, information and human relations head, Sutopo Purwo Nugroho, said not only farms and plantations had been razed but also forested areas in national parks and biosphere reserves.

"The damage to forest areas is massive, as illegal logging is carried out on a large scale with heavy machinery, such as excavators," Sutopo said.

Devastated conservation forest areas in Riau, added Sutopo, which totaled 2,398 hectares, were located in the Giam Siak Kecil Biosphere Area in Bukit Batu (923 hectares); the Kerumutan Wildlife Refuge (372 hectares); the Sungai Dumai Natural Tourist Park (81 hectares); the Tesso Nilo National Park (95 hectares), and the Bukit Bungkuk Natural Reserve (9 hectares), along with other utility and non-forest areas (868 hectares).

Arsonists set fire to forested areas to save money. If they were to use mechanical methods to clear land, it could cost them up to Rp 5 million (US\$442) per hectare.