

RI pollution defense not enough: Green group

The government's promise to tackle the problem of annual haze with a \$30 million fund and limited military equipment has been called into question by experts anticipating worse pollution levels than last year due to the El Niño weather pattern.

The government has failed in previous attempts to stop the regional haze, with last year recording the worst pollution readings since 1997. Outgoing Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono was forced in mid-2013 to apologize to neighbors Singapore and Malaysia, which were blanketed in thick smog caused by forest fires in Indonesia.

With expectations that the El Niño dry weather pattern will hit around the middle of the year, the haze could be worse than in 2013, conservation experts told Reuters.

"We are talking hundreds of thousands of hectares that will probably burn and I doubt [the government] will be able to cover this much of an area," said David Gaveau, a scientist at the Center for International Forestry Research, a conservation organization based in Indonesia.

"We're expecting El Niño and if it comes, we're going to see much more fires than last year."

The dense smoke from slash-and-burn land clearances often originates from the islands of Sumatra and Kalimantan, where large forest concessions are held by pulp and paper and palm oil companies, some of which are listed in Singapore.