

RI can handle haze on its own: Minister

Though haze caused by land clearing in Sumatra has become a worsening scourge for neighboring countries in recent years, Environment Minister Balthasar Kambuaya has asserted that Indonesia can handle the problem on its own.

“The haze issue is very serious but Indonesia doesn’t need help from Malaysia and Singapore,” said Balthasar in his keynote speech at the 2014 Sumatra Eco-region Environmental Management Coordinating Meeting in Pekanbaru, Riau, on Monday.

He added that the Indonesian government would never accept equipment assistance from Malaysia and Singapore, though that did not preclude possible environmental collaborations in the future. Balthasar complained that the two countries had characterized substandard equipment they had previously given to Indonesia as “considerable assistance”, thus making Indonesia look bad.

He went on to say that the Environment Ministry would implement three initiatives to prevent perennial forest and peatland fires plaguing Riau — typically the worst affected province — for the past 17 years. The first initiative is to develop a hotspot early warning system by involving the local community.

“Right now, the governor [of Riau] receives a report on a fire after a week, when 300 hectares of forest have already been razed,” said Balthasar. “In the future, the role and the number of personnel will be raised, especially during the dry season. If left unchecked, fires will further spread and many forested areas will be engulfed by fire.”

The second initiative is to change the behavior of local residents who set fire to forests to clear them, usually at the behest of plantation companies. The third initiative is to strengthen law enforcement. Balthasar said 21 investigators had been dispatched over the past month to probe 46 plantation and forestry companies in Riau believed to be involved in setting haze-causing fires over the past two years.

“As many as 23 companies are being processed further as they were found to have intentionally set fire to the forest,” he said. “Proving an environmental crime is no easy task, as teamwork among stakeholders is crucial. Besides producing expert witnesses to strengthen evidence, I will also coordinate with the relevant ministries to trace who had issued permits to the companies in question. We will jointly resolve the issue,” he added.

Balthasar declined to give the names of the companies found to have intentionally set fires, but he promised he would bring the cases to court. “I have formed a team to speed up the legal process and given a six-month deadline,” said Balthasar.

“Some say the fires were due to natural factors, but I’m sure most of them were caused by humans.”

He has asked relevant provincial, regency and municipal administrations to continue coordinating with his ministry regarding fire prevention and fighting.

“May and June will be dry and we must be prepared to anticipate the haze issue so it will no longer become a regional issue.”

Meanwhile, Riau Governor Annas Maamun said his administration had launched a number of programs to anticipate the forest and peatland fires, such as increasing the number of surveillance and firefighting personnel in villages and educating people about the potential disasters during the dry season, which is predicted to take place from May to September this year.

“The past haze in Riau brought negative impacts to people’s lives, especially regarding the local economy, education and health sectors,” he said.