

## **Central government urged to help fight Riau forest fires**

A day after declaring emergency-response status for the haze, the Riau administration called on the central government to help extinguish the expanding forest and peatland fires in Riau.

Riau Governor Annas Maamun revealed on Wednesday that he had communicated with the home minister and asked the National Disaster Mitigation Agency (BNPB) to immediately provide assistance.

“The central government must pay serious attention as Riau is overwhelmed,” said Annas

Annas said the number of hotspots had reached more than 1,200, while aerial firefighting efforts had not been successful so far.

“The extent of the fires in various regencies and cities in Riau, now amounts to 6,900 hectares. The haze situation is even more alarming and it is covering all of Riau.”

As well as funding, Annas said, Riau was in dire need of planes to douse the fires. Earlier, Riau planned to use disaster-response funds of Rp 10 billion (US\$858,000) from the provincial budget to lease two helicopters, each capable of carrying 500 liters of water to carry out water bombing. However, the plan was shelved due to strong winds and poor visibility which could endanger the helicopters.

Annas said he had also discussed the matter with firefighting experts and concluded that the forest and peatland fires in Riau could no longer be handled by water bombing.

“Based on studies, helicopters are only able to douse fires on the surface of peatland. Water bombing must be carried out by planes able to carry a higher volume of water. These planes are only available in Jakarta, not Riau,” he said.

Annas also requested the home minister to immediately formulate a legal umbrella for the Riau provincial administration so it could recruit contractual firefighters who would be placed in 1,764 villages in Riau. “This needs approval from the home minister to prepare funds to pay the firefighters. Riau hopes the central government will respond wisely to the proposal,” he said.

“I have also asked law enforcers to seek a way to deter people from clearing the forest by burning. If needs be, charge them under the corruption eradication law. The forest that they burn is state property, so their actions have caused significant losses to the state and people, so it would be appropriate to charge them with corruption,” added Annas.

