

Riau remains vigilant against haze

The haze emergency in Riau officially ended on Friday and the National Disaster Mitigation Agency (BNPB) has handed over recovery and control operations to the Riau provincial administration. The administration, however, remains on the alert as it has been forecast that the province will have an extreme dry season in coming months.

BNPB head and commander of the Riau Haze Disaster Mitigation Integrated Task Force, Syamsul Ma'arif, said the task of stopping haze from forest and peatland fires had been completed through aerial and land operations as well as law enforcement.

"I have reported to President [Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono] on the achievement of the haze mitigation operation, which was badly needed by the community. The President deemed the military operation to overcome the haze in Riau a success," Syamsul said during a rollcall at Roesmin Nurjadin Airbase in Pekanbaru before sending task force troops back to their units.

Since an emergency was first declared, BNPB deployed 1,000 personnel from the Army, Air Force and Navy from various units in Java to assist the Disaster Mitigation Quick Reaction (PRCPB) team in Riau.

The Riau haze mitigation operation cost Rp 164 billion (US\$14.49 million) in state funds, most of which was used to lease aircraft, including helicopters, and to cover the cost of water bombing and weather modification technology (WMT). The amount was higher than the Rp 103 billion spent on similar operations last year.

"In the next couple of days, PRCPB personnel, who have been on duty in Riau, will return to their respective units, but the helicopters for water bombing operations and aircraft for WMT will remain here to assist the recovery operation," said Syamsul.

"The weather in Riau will soon be drier than last year, so the potential for forest and peatland fires will be higher. Anticipatory measures have to be intensified in order to prevent [forest and peatland fires] and haze. Despite no longer having full control, the BNPB will remain to assist the Riau provincial administration, including in providing funds and logistics," he added.

He said the BNPB was ready to hold a second operation by deploying a bigger force, involving 2,500 personnel from the military and police in the third week of May should the condition worsen and the provincial administration was unable to handle it alone.

"So as to prevent haze from recurring, plus we won't have to expend more energy. We already have the experience to mitigate the problem," added Syamsul. Meanwhile, Riau Haze Disaster Mitigation Integrated Task Force deputy chief Maj. Gen. Iskandar MS said the President had instructed all those concerned, be they civilian or military, at the lowest level, to take responsibility for the smallest fire in their respective areas.

"The district military commanders, district police chiefs, district administrative chiefs and other officials must accept sanctions, such as being dismissed, if they fail to report a fire in their areas before it becomes bigger and difficult to control," said Iskandar.

"On the other hand, areas kept free of fire will receive awards, the form of which will be decided later."

Separately, Riau Deputy Governor Arsyadjuliandi Rachman said the Riau administration was drafting a gubernatorial regulation as a legal tool to allocate 2 percent of the provincial budget and 50 percent from corporate social responsibility funds for the prevention and mitigation of forest and peatland fires.

"In the next four days, discussions on the regulation will be completed. We will consider all input and suggestions," he said.