

# **Riau prepares for worst-case scenario**

The Forestry Ministry and Riau provincial administration are preparing for a worst-case scenario by increasing personnel and equipment readiness ahead of the peak of the dry season, which is expected to last from June through August. Forestry Minister Zulkifli Hasan urged all stakeholders to increase their vigilance in handling the worsening haze in the province.

“The current fires must be prevented from spreading so that we will not be criticized any longer,” Zulkifli said after attending the roll call of a haze mitigation task force at the Roesmin Nurjadin Airbase in Pekanbaru on Wednesday.

“Last year, neighboring countries protested against the haze. The President even had to apologize to them. That must not be repeated this year, as it would cause shame if we had to apologize two years in a row,” he added. The haze has caused problems not only for Riau residents but also people living in neighboring provinces and countries, principally Singapore and Malaysia.

Last year, the haze issue sparked a diplomatic war of words between Indonesia and the two neighboring countries, forcing President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono to apologize to Singapore and Malaysia for the pollution caused by forest fires. In Jambi, thick haze forced airlines to divert their routes due to low visibility at Sultan Thaha Airport on Wednesday.

According to Zulkifli, Riau would witness a number of large expansions of oil palm estates for several years to come, given its flat topography, which was suitable for plantations.

Production forests, which have yet to obtain operating permits, as well as protected conservation areas have been encroached by squatters, due to the growth in the palm oil industry.

Zulkifli claimed that more than 2,000 squatters had been settled in the Giam Siak Kecil biosphere area in Bukit Batu and the Tesso Nilo National Park for the past three years.

“The government cannot just evict them because many would protest that their basic human rights were being violated. But the Riau Fire Mitigation task force has taken stern action by razing their huts and confiscating their equipment,” he continued. Zulkifli suggested that joint patrols should be intensified so that even the smallest fire could be doused immediately.

“In Brazil, forest patrols are the key to success in eliminating forest fires. The moment a satellite detects hotspots, helicopters are deployed to seek them out,” he said. “If we can apply that method the moment we see smoke, authorities could catch the perpetrators and financiers and Riau would be free of the fires,” he added. He also reminded law enforcers to secure scorched areas, be they owned by individuals or companies, as they could be repossessed by the state.

“From now on, the police should cordon off scorched areas and arrest not only those people who set the fires but also those who cultivate the areas, and charge them with violating Law No. 18/2013 [on the prevention and eradication of forest destruction],” said Zulkifli. Meanwhile, Riau Governor Annas Maamun urged the central government to revise the regulation on setting the emergency response status. As of now, the provincial administration cannot set the emergency response status before half the regencies and cities in the province have agreed a status level.

“There are 12 regencies and cities in Riau, and it’s illogical that we must wait until half of them have set the emergency status before the provincial administration can disburse funds,” he said. Annas also urged the corporate sector to be more active in mitigating the fires, which have so far destroyed 11,138 hectares of forested area.

“More than 32 million people have suffered acute respiratory illness, schools have had to close, 90 homes have been gutted and 310 residents have been displaced,” he said.

