

# Residents on alert as haze strikes again

While thousands of people in Java are facing an extreme rainy season and flash floods damaging their homes and farms, people in other parts of the country have been choked in thick haze from forest fires. The haze in Pontianak, West Kalimantan, has prompted the city administration to close kindergartens and elementary schools from Thursday to Saturday.

Pontianak Mayor Sutarmidji has also urged residents not to burn trash, which could add to worsening air pollution. Pontianak Environmental Agency (BLH) head, Imran, said the intensity of haze on Thursday was higher than Wednesday. The Air Pollution Standard Index (ISPU) showed conditions were between "very unhealthy" and "hazardous" at certain times.

"These are very unhealthy conditions. The ISPU level was above 200 at 11 p.m., while the hazardous level was over 300 between 12:30 a.m. and 2 a.m. During normal conditions the ISPU level is between 0 and 50, and moderate conditions between 50 and 100," said Imran.

Based on observations by the Meteorology, Climatology and Geophysics Agency (BMKG) Supadio Pontianak office via satellite images on Feb. 4, hot spots were detected in 97 locations, some of them in peatland areas on the fringe of Pontianak. It has not rained in the area for almost a month.

Pontianak resident Tavib has anticipated the pollution by buying a pack of masks. Every time he leaves home, he always brings the masks, which he has moistened to protect his lungs.

"I've learned from the previous haze that hit the city in 2007," Tavib said. Haze also caused flight delays on Thursday when 12 flights — six departures and six incoming flights — were delayed due to poor visibility. An early flight from Jakarta to Pontianak was rerouted back to Jakarta by the Supadio International Airport authorities due to the dense haze.

State-run airport management firm PT Angkasa Pura II operational division head at the airport, Syarif Usmulyani, Alqadrie confirmed to The Jakarta Post on Thursday that the thick haze in the morning had caused visibility of only 200 meters. PT Angkasa Pura II was forced to close Supadio airport for more than two hours on Thursday. At 6 a.m. visibility was 200 meters and gradually improved every 30 minutes.

Riau is also facing similar problems as the Pekanbaru BMKG detected 261 hot spots across the province on Thursday. Head of data and information division at the Pekanbaru BMKG, Slamet Riyadi, said most hot spots were seen in the Bengkalis, Pelalawan, Siak and Indragiri Hilir regencies. "The hot spots have spread to eight of the 12 regencies/cities in Riau. The hot spots are also detected in Rokan Hilir, Indragiri Hulu and Kampar regencies and Pekanbaru city," Slamet said, adding the dry season would last until mid-March.

Although most areas in the province have been blanketed by smog, it is unlikely the haze will reach neighboring countries at this moment. "Malaysia and Singapore are still safe [from haze] as the smog is heading southeast. The wind pattern most likely changes around May or June," he added. Riau Health Agency head Zainal Arifin said his office had procured 500,000 masks to anticipate a worst-case scenario.

Land and forest fires have for years been a major problem for Riau as smallholders and plantation firms allow slash-and-burn farming methods. In 2013, more than 10,000 residents suffered acute respiratory infections (ARIs) due to haze. The fires have also sparked diplomatic tensions between Indonesia and neighboring countries. Meanwhile, in Batam, Riau Islands, the prolonged dry season has also caused droughts in a number of areas on the island, causing widespread bush fires.

BMKG Hang Nadim head Philip Mustamu said Batam was categorized as a non-seasonal region, with rain lacking in the months of January and February. Batam Free Trade Zone Management Agency (BPK FTZ) spokesman and One-Roof Integrated Services (PTSP) director Dwi Djoko Wiwoho said the fire-fighting unit had apparently received many reports of fires near housing areas.