

Thick haze also caused by forest fires in Malaysia, says BNPB

The thick haze that has been blanketing Riau does not only originate from the province itself but is apparently also from neighboring countries that are also facing forest fire problems, particularly Malaysia, according to an official.

National Disaster Mitigation Agency (BNPB) head Syamsul Maarif said that the NOAA-18, Terra and Aqua satellites, belonging to the United States' National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), detected thousands of hotspots across Malaysia, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam and Myanmar on Thursday.

"Forest fires [...] in Sumatra, such as those in Riau, Jambi, Aceh and North Sumatra are nothing compared to fires that have been occurring in mainland Southeast Asia," Syamsul said from the haze disaster mitigation post at Roesmin Nurjadin Airbase in Pekanbaru, Riau.

He confirmed that as of Thursday, smog covering neighboring countries was not from Indonesia.

"We have made sure that Malaysia and Singapore are not affected by the Riau haze. Based on our monitoring, the haze is heading to West and North Sumatra," he continued.

"Don't blame Indonesia if other countries are blanketed by haze, because [those] countries are also facing [their own] haze problems," he added.

In fact, Syamsul said that some of the haze that had been covering parts of Indonesia was from Malaysia. "This time around, the wind is blowing from the east to the southwest. Haze from Malaysia has now reached Indonesia," Syamsul said.

"So therefore, I suggest that other countries do not make a fuss about the haze in Indonesia. They should think about fighting forest fires in their own countries. Indonesia has obviously done more than other countries in dealing with the haze problem."

Even though Syamsul blamed others countries for also contributing to haze problems, he called on local administrations in nine haze-prone provinces — five in Sumatra and four in Kalimantan — to stay alert about the potential for a worst-case scenario, as this year's dry season will be more arid than it was last year due to the El Nino impact.

"If we cannot fight fires comprehensively in July, it is more likely that haze will move from Indonesia to mainland Southeast Asia as winds will change from a southwesterly to a northeasterly direction," he said.

The BNPB has been working with the Agency for the Assessment and Application of Technology (BPPT) since Wednesday to sow tons of salt in clouds above Kampar, Siak and Pelalawan regencies in Riau to modify weather.

"[As of Thursday afternoon] rain had yet to fall on the aforementioned areas, but it was cloudy there. That's good news," said Roesmin Nurjadin Airbase commander Col. Andyawan, who also leads the firefighting task force.

"We have also deployed eight helicopters to carry out water bombing to put out fires in Bengkalis and the Meranti Islands," he added.

Meanwhile, Pekanbaru Meteorology, Climatology and Geophysics Agency (BMKG) head Sugarin said that the chance of rain in Riau would remain low for the next three days as clouds had only been detected in the west and the south of the province in areas including Kampar, Pelalawan, Rokan Hulu, Siak and Kuantan Singingi..

