

The week in review: Of rising haze & easing tensions

Much of Sumatra and Kalimantan has been hazy because of smog that has gone from bad to worse. The seasonal wild fires resulting from illegal forest clearing sites and smoldering peatland have seen smoke drift to the neighboring countries of Singapore and Malaysia. Indonesia is living up to the “smoke exporting country” tag. The tiny neighbor, Singapore, has begun complaining about the choking smoke that disrupts business and poses health hazards. Along with Malaysia, it urged Indonesia to do more to put out the fires that occur during every other dry spell.

On Wednesday, Singapore’s National Environment Agency (NEA) reported that its Pollutant Standards Index (PSI) had reached an unhealthy level of 102 in the evening. A PSI reading above 100 is categorized as “unhealthy”, while 50-99 is “moderate”. Of course, the pollution was worse in areas like West Sumatra and Riau, where most of the hot spots were identified. In Sijunjung regency, West Sumatra, for example, visibility had dropped to between 300 and 500 meters on Friday. As the haze exacerbates, local governments have distributed tens of thousands of safety masks, especially to school students and the elderly — the most vulnerable groups.

In the cool, West Sumatra highlands of Bukittinggi, the local Global Atmosphere Watch station recorded on Thursday that the air pollution level was at 134 micrograms per cubic meter, which was interpreted as “nearing unhealthy”. Bukittinggi Mayor Ismet Amzis is ready to close schools if conditions worsen. The National Disaster Mitigation Agency (BNPB) also reported a growing number of hot spots, especially in Riau and South Sumatra.

Amid the worrying signs of worsening haze affecting millions of people in Southeast Asia came a respite when the Indonesian House of Representatives ratified the long-overdue ASEAN Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution on Thursday. The treaty will allow other countries to send personnel and equipment to help control forest fires in the 10 ASEAN member countries. Indonesia had been reluctant to ratify the crucial pact as it did not want other countries to “intervene” in its domestic affairs, an excuse that the international community has dismissed.

It is expected to place more pressure on the Indonesian government to better enforce the law pertaining to forest fires, which have been blamed largely on plantation companies. Weak law enforcement has been held up as the reason behind the recurrence of the environmental disaster. President-elect Joko “Jokowi” Widodo’s revelation that he will allocate 16 of his planned 34 Cabinet seats to political parties supporting his government is expected to ease political tensions that have dogged the country since he won the July election. The announcement quickly changed the political landscape, which had become tense given the bitter rivalry between the Jokowi camp and that of losing candidate Prabowo Subianto, who still refuses to accept defeat on the pretext that the election was rigged. The move shook Prabowo’s Red-and-White Coalition of six parties, spearheaded by his Gerindra Party. The other five are the United Development Party (PPP), the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS), the National Mandate Party (PAN), the Golkar Party and President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono’s Democratic Party. In an apparent change of heart, the Islamic-based PPP and PAN dispatched their senior leaders to the national meeting of the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P), which is Jokowi’s main backer along with the National Awakening Party (PKB), the Hanura Party and the NasDem Party.

The presence of PPP and PAN politicians in the meeting strengthened the notion that the parties will join Jokowi’s Gotong Royong Coalition. For the PPP, the development is also deepening a bitter division within the party between those who support Prabowo and those who support Jokowi. Likely to follow suit is the Democratic Party. In the ongoing deliberation of a crucial bill on regional elections, it will shift its support to favor Jokowi’s coalition, which is struggling to maintain the direct elections system. Jokowi’s initial refusal to include “representatives” of political parties in his Cabinet has presented him with difficulties in consolidating his coalition amid increasing hostility from the Red-and-White Coalition.

Jokowi has learned the hard way to form a solid government, as the Gotong Royong Coalition, which commands only 37 percent of 560 House of Representatives seats, has appeared powerless on the legislative front. The Red-and-White Coalition easily endorsed a bill on House internal rules, which denied the PDI-P of its legal privilege as the legislative election winner to chair the legislative body. The Gotong Royong Coalition is facing a similar defeat in the ongoing battle of the regional election bill, unless some Red-and-White Coalition member parties switch sides. Jokowi’s initial intention to exclude politicians from his Cabinet was both naïve and illogical because doing so would have denied one of the main functions of a political party, which is to seek power in government. As his coalition’s recent defeat on the legislative front has taught him, Jokowi will need a bigger ally and more “friends” from other parties to defend him in the House, to help him build a stable government. What matters most is that Jokowi must convince the public that the politicians he selects for his Cabinet are truly competent and are of high integrity.