

Cities, including East Jakarta, win award for clean air

Densely populated, congested and perpetually blanketed by thick polluted air. These were three features easily recalled by Nurfina Osman, a college student living in Duren Sawit, when asked about East Jakarta.

"I always have to carry a mask or a handkerchief to cover my mouth and nose from the dirty air. For me, East Jakarta is no different from Depok. You will slowly but surely die of respiratory problems in both places due to the terrible pollution," said Nurfina, who spends four days a week in Depok, West Java, pursuing her degree in anthropology.

Surprisingly enough, East Jakarta is one of six cities across the country that has won an award from the Environment Ministry for its clean air. In the list, East Jakarta finished in third position after Surabaya, East Java and Medan in North Sumatra. The three cities were placed in the metropolitan category.

The top three in the provincial towns category were Surakarta, Batam and Malang.

"I hope other cities can follow the examples set by these cities in providing quality air for the people. I really hope that all winning cities can improve the air quality in their regions," Environment Minister Balthasar Kambuaya said on Wednesday.

Kambuaya said clean air could cut health spending.

Citing a 1994 World Bank study, he said that Jakarta had spent up to Rp 500 billion (US\$55 million) to treat pollution-related illnesses.

According to the study, air pollution was also responsible for 1,200 premature deaths among babies, 32 million respiratory problems and 464,000 cases of asthma.

The minister also cited a 2004 report on the health of Jakarta's population, saying that air pollution had triggered 43 percent of respiratory problems and 1.7 percent of eye irritation problems in the capital.

In spite of its decision to name East Jakarta as one of cities with the cleanest air, a 2011 draft report from the ministry said air pollution had prompted an increase in health spending of up to Rp 37 trillion.

"The ministry set up a program that we call the Langit Biru [Blue Sky] program to encourage the city government to curb pollution so that it could spend its budget more effectively," said Kambuaya.

He said that the ministry would allocate around Rp 200 billion next year to support the efforts of provincial governments in reducing air pollution.

Prior to giving the award, the ministry measured air quality in 26 cities, 14 metropolises and 12 large cities in 2011. The ministry measured gas emissions produced by vehicles, traffic management, roadside monitoring and fuel quality checks.

When asked why other municipalities in Jakarta failed to win the award, the ministry's deputy for air pollution monitoring, Ade Palguna, said that worsening traffic congestion and poorer air quality were likely to blame. (msa)