

## Wildfire hits forest on Mount Agung

Wildfire has hit around 200 hectares of pine forest on the slopes of Bali's most sacred, and highest, volcano, Mount Agung, in Karangasem, east Bali. The fires, which started Friday night in six hot spots, strengthened and spread as a strong wind blew and could be clearly seen from the neighboring island, Lombok.

"At first, we thought that Mount Agung had erupted. The flames were obviously visible from here in Mataram," said Subagyo, a resident of Mataram. Karangasem Regent Wayan Geredeg was seen on site calling for immediate support to extinguish the fires from the provincial and central governments. "We need modern and high-tech equipment to stop the forest fires," the regent said.

A helicopter sent by the National Search and Rescue Agency (Basarnas) had already arrived at the location, but only to monitor the condition of the hot spots. The fires mostly affected the eastern part of the mountain in the vicinity of Bankubu and Jungutan villages.

Mount Agung is sacred to the Balinese people, who believe it is the replica of Mount Mery, the central axis of the universe. The island's mother temple, Pura Besakih, is located high on the slope of Mount Agung. The volcano last erupted during 1963-1964 and is still active. In addition to its religious importance, Mount Agung is also an excellent habitat for the island's Bali Starling, which is an endangered species, as well as other animals and medicinal plants. I Gede Jaya Serataberana, head of Bali's Disaster Management Agency, explained that technically, the helicopter could not approach the hot spots. "It was too dangerous," he said.

Geredeg predicted that the forest fires had been caused by the current dry season, which started in August.

"There is the possibility of human error. The area is dry and dry tree trunks can feed serious fires in this windy and hot weather," the regent said.

Hundreds of volunteers, nature lovers, members of the army, paramedics and rescue teams were ready to help evacuate locals possibly trapped in the fires.

On Sunday morning at 9 a.m., Tjokorda Darma, a rescue leader from Karangasem, said that the number of volunteers was increasing. "They came from Jakarta and Yogyakarta. Dozens of university students have also arrived here," Dharma said. Around 100 volunteers had just climbed to the mountain's six hot spots to search for any residents and to extinguish the fires manually. "It will take at least three hours to reach the nearest hot spot," he said.

Officers and volunteers struggled to extinguish the fires in two of the hot spots, with hot weather, strong winds and dried out trunks and trees hampering their efforts.

Meanwhile, Denpasar's search-and-rescue team monitored the forest fire locations saying that it would be ineffective to use manual techniques to extinguish the fires.

"The fires have struck pine forests in which the height of the trees is between 4 to 5 meters. It would be hazardous to let volunteers and the fire brigade extinguish the fires manually," explained Dewa Made Indra, head of Bali's Search and Rescue Agency.

On Sunday afternoon, fires were still burning in four spots near Kubu village.