

Air pollution emergency in South East Asia points to systemic failure

By Gustav Kemper
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On Sunday, June 23, 2013, the government of Malaysia declared a state of emergency for the two southern districts of Muar and Ledang, where raging forest and plantation fires are causing air pollution at a level not seen in history.

The Air Pollutant Index (API) climbed to 746 at 7 a.m., reaching double the level considered to be hazardous and life threatening to elderly people and young children if exposed over a long period of time. Government offices, schools, factories, plantations and construction sites were closed as well as schools in the region of Malacca, Selangor and Kuala Lumpur.

In Singapore, the Pollutant Standards Index (PSI) spiked at 401 on Friday afternoon, surpassing by far the level for unhealthy air, which is at 100. All values above 300 are considered as hazardous.

While wild fires and haze are an annual occurrence in the dry season in Indonesia and Malaysia, with small farmers burning crops to clear the land for new plants, the dramatic expansion of large palm oil plantations and deforestation for pulp production of paper mills have the largest impact on the air pollution in the region.

With the estimated production of some 31 million metric tons (MT) in 2013, Indonesia supplies 53 percent of the world palm oil trade. Malaysia follows with some 33 percent, or 19 million MT.

The Indonesian government was quick to blame Malaysian or Singaporean companies owning large oil palm plantations, while the Malaysian and Singaporean authorities pointed at the responsibility of Indonesia to enforce anti-burning laws in Sumatra.

As the financial district of Singapore vanished in thick haze, the government hurried to insure the public that all measures are being taken to tackle the issue. However, the health authorities were ill prepared as air

filter masks were on short supply and pharmacies were out of stock for several days.

Fearing the negative impact on the tourist business and damage to the reputation of a “clean city” and ideal headquarter for foreign investors, the government hurried to announce an action plan, distributing 200,000 free face masks to the poorest households and offering support to the Indonesian firefighters.

At the same time, they tried to downplay the issue by pointing out that the PSI index of 401 was measured as a 3-hour average index and thus more sensitive to the peak values of the air pollution. They suggested that a 24-hour average index was a more realistic indicator of the health risk.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, who was meeting with residents of the Ang Mo Kio constituency, insisted that “for most people, the haze is an inconvenience; life can carry on”. Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen, chairing the Haze Inter-Ministerial Committee, stated that while companies were advised to distribute masks to construction workers, the “country cannot grind to a halt” because of the haze.

While governments are clearly more concerned about the commercial impact of the haze, ordinary working people are angry that after many years, the recurring problem of haze has not been brought under control.

In fact, it is impossible to deal with the problem in a system where a quick return on investments is the guiding mantra of business.

Worldwide demand for palm oil is growing. It is a popular cooking ingredient in Asian households due to the fact that it is cheaper than other vegetable oils. It is used for the production of biodiesel, for instance in the Singaporean based refinery of the Finnish company Neste Oil.

Owners of large palm oil plantations receive

concessions from the Indonesian State for the exploitation of land and forests. However, the control of their operations is made difficult, as ownership of plantations is sometimes not recorded in the land title register.

This gives room for widespread corruption, as was shown again with the detention of the Governor of Riau, Rusli Zaina, by the Indonesian Corruption Eradication Commission on June 14 for issuing illegal logging permits among other charges.

The mayor of Dumai, Khairul Anwar, told the *Straits Times* that some investors from Indonesian cities or from abroad ally with local farmers. “Many just come in and occupy the land illegally,” he said.

Satellite images of the National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration detected more than 1,000 hot spots in the province of Riau alone. Access to the plantations is difficult, lacking paved roads, and lacking clear demarcations of ownership, it is difficult to identify the source of the fires. Plantation owners try to deny their responsibility. As the ground is mostly made up of peatland, fires can easily spread even underground and owners argue that fires started originally outside of their concession.

Asia Pacific Resources International (April), for example, is owner of plantations producing fiber and pulp for the paper production. After first stating that the company followed strict “no-burn” policies, evidence by satellite imagery made them accept on their web page that “there are currently three fires in our concessions covering approximately 20 hectares”.

As a team of journalists of the Singaporean *Straits Times* reported, large plantations often subcontract clearance of land to smaller companies without defining the method to be used. These subcontractors tend to hire smaller companies to do the final work against very low payments, sometimes without a contract. To save costs, these companies often chose the slash-and-burn method rather than using excavators and bulldozers to flatten the land.

A small farmer said that it takes him just 10 liters of petrol at US\$6.40 (50,000 rupiah) to set one hectare on fire versus US\$1,506 (15 million rupiah) needed for the mechanical clearing method, i.e. 300 times as much. Small farmers and poor farm laborers often have no choice but to resort to cheap but environmentally damaging methods of farming in order to make a

living.

According to the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia Pacific (ESCAP), lives lost through pollution in Asian cities is heavy, “with an estimated 500,000 premature deaths occurring each year”.

In May 2011, Greenpeace International critically welcomed a moratorium on permits for new concessions in primary forests and peatlands by the Indonesian government, with the hope that the government could be pushed to extend the protection of the forests. And the organization was “happy but not celebrating” in May 2013, when the moratorium was extended for another two years. But any trust in the government of President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono is totally misplaced, as the government is highly influenced by the interests of the pulp and paper, palm oil and mining industry.

The solution to the haze problem, the conservation of forests in particular and protection of the environment in general can be secured only by the working population whose class interests are guided not by profit maximization but rather the need to secure a healthy and livable environment.

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