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Haze-Hit Countries Meeting Ends Without Detailed Plan

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INDONESIA: October 16, 2006

PEKANBARU, Indonesia - Southeast Asian nations failed on Friday to agree on a detailed plan to tackle Indonesian forest fires, telling Jakarta it must ratify a smog pact before it could expect large amounts of aid.

Environment and other ministers from Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand and Brunei gathered in Pekanbaru, on Indonesia's Sumatra island, on Friday to discuss the crisis.

Little was agreed and officials instead pledged to hold more talks in the near future.

Indonesia had appealed at the meeting for help to fight the forest and brush fires that have spread smoke over much of Southeast Asia, triggering fears of a repeat of months of choking haze in 1997-98 that cost the region billions in economic losses.

One official estimated the fires raging in parts of Sumatra and Indonesia's part of Borneo island had so far cost the country US\$1 billion in economic damage this year.

Indonesia's neighbours are growing increasingly frustrated with Jakarta's failure to tackle the annual dry season fires, most of which are deliberately lit by farmers as well as timber and oil palm plantation owners.

When the meeting ended on Friday evening, some individual pledges of support had been made, but Jakarta had been told it would have to formally ratify an Association of South East Asian Nations haze treaty before expecting major funding from it.

Regional countries signed the 2002 ASEAN Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution. Indonesia this week pledged to ratify the pact.

Asked at a news conference about implementing the ASEAN haze agreement, Malaysian environment

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minister Azmi Khalid said, "We don't have that yet because until the agreement is signed, we cannot move forward."

Singaporean environment minister Yaacob Ibrahim said: "If the agreement is signed the fund will be operational. The fund will allow us to do a lot more," referring to provisions in the pact.

FORCES OF NATURE

Indonesian environment minister Rachmat Witoelar opened the meeting by saying Jakarta recognised that forces of nature and social conditions had severely limited the effectiveness of the government's fire suppression measures and called for ASEAN aid.

As if to underline the haze threat, the meeting in Pekanbaru, the capital of Riau province, is in an area of Sumatra badly affected by the raging fires.

But the minister's appeal failed to win over his neighbours and the joint statement issued at the end lacked mention of specific fresh direct steps, beyond saying "firefighting mechanism(s)" would be upgraded and more effectively used.

It also announced plans for a regional workshop in Indonesia in November that would look into new measures to tackle the haze problem, including seeking international expertise to develop a comprehensive plan of action. It also called for a ministerial steering committee to oversee implementation.

"The formation of the committee and the outcomes of the regional workshop will be submitted to the ASEAN summit in December 2006," the statement added.

ASEAN includes the Philippines, Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam in addition to the countries meeting in Pekanbaru.

Malaysia has proposed the five countries at the meeting buy two Russian-built Ilyushin aircraft to scoop up sea water and douse fires, Riau police chief Ito Sumardi told reporters.

Singapore's Ibrahim said it is offering firefighters and a C-130 airplane for cloud seeding, adding: "Everybody should do their part to tackle the problem."

The fires have been burning for weeks, creating the smoke that has made many ill, shut airports and threatened wildlife in protected forests.

Indonesian Forestry Minister Malam Sambat Kaban said more than 75 percent of the fires were not in government forests but plantations and farms of private companies and local people.

He said Central Kalimantan on the Indonesian part of

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Borneo island was the worst hit, with around 1 million hectares (2.5 million acres) of peat land in one area on fire. Peat fires are particularly hard to put out and can burn for months.

Khairul Zainal, head of the environmental impact control agency in Riau, estimated the cost of the haze at 10 trillion rupiah (US\$1.09 billion) for Kalimantan and Sumatra.

Indonesia bans slash-and-burn practices by farmers, timber firms and plantations. But prosecutions take time and few have stuck.

Story by Ahmad Pathoni

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