

# Days of deluge over as heatwave brings blaze risk

**PETALING JAYA:** The days of floods are coming to an end; it is now time to prepare for fires, especially peat fires.

With peatlands covering 2,560,341ha of the country, they could be a huge fire hazard.

The Environment Department is already getting ready for the hot and dry weather expected next month.

The El Nino phenomenon is expected to continue until the middle of 2024, along with the positive Indian Ocean Dipole until the first quarter of 2024, leading to hot weather.

The department's director-general Datuk Wan Abdul Latiff Wan Jaffar reminded Malaysians that open burning can spread and cause extensive fires during the dry season.

"There can be a heatwave in March and even haze," he said in an interview with The Star.

Peatlands and waste disposal sites are the most fire-prone areas in the country, he said, adding that of the over 5,000 open burning cases received by the department last year, eight were large-scale fires involving peatlands and landfills.

"Up to Dec 12 last year, 5,121 complaints of open burning cases were received, with 81% of them involving the burning of rubbish.

"Eight cases were large-scale open burning. Four cases involved peatland fires while four were landfill fires," he said.



**Cool it down:** A fireman putting out peat fires, which proves challenging due to the area's peat soil condition and dry weather.

The biggest peat fire recorded last year was in Kampung Beoh, Mukim Beris Lalang, Bachok, Kelantan, which saw 35ha of land, the size of 28 football fields, razed from March 27 to May 8.

A bushfire in Mukim Bebar, Pekan, Pahang, from April 22 to July 20, involved a bigger area: 263ha.

Pekan was again hit by a large-scale peatland fire near Kampung Baru Cenderawasih, from May 15 to 23, this time covering 12ha.

Climate experts warned that open burning during the coming hot and dry weather will pose serious risks to the environment and public health.

Meteorological expert Prof Emeritus Datuk Dr Azizan Abu Samah said that during the tail end of the northeast monsoon, the north of the peninsula and southern Thailand would have clear skies and a drier climate.

He said the lack of clouds would result in higher temperatures in

the afternoon and cooler nights.

Maximum daytime temperature can hit near 40°C, with night time temperatures dropping to around 24°C, he said.

"El Nino conditions are still prevalent, so most regional forecasts are for drier-than-normal.

"During this dry season, traditional open burning in the country's rice production areas such as Kedah and Perlis is expected," he said.

He added that similar activities

may occur in other padi growing areas like Sekinchan and Perak.

As for oil palm plantation on peat soil, the agroindustry does not practise open burning and so, the burning of peatland may come from market gardening activities, said Prof Emeritus Azizan, a senior research fellow at the Institute of Ocean and Earth Sciences.

"We cannot blame Indonesia, as any smoke will not be blown our way. The main transboundary source will be from the burning in Vietnam and Cambodia.

"This is from the corn agroindustry in those countries, which usually burn their fields during this period," he said.

As such, he said the Asean Transboundary Agreement needs to be strengthened to tackle open burning in the region.

Environmental and wildlife expert Prof Dr Ahmad Ismail of Universiti Putra Malaysia said authorities should identify hot-spots for forest fires and peatland burning, educate the public and agencies on such occurrences, and utilise technology "to quickly and effectively stop the fires, especially those close to protected forest and human residential areas".

"Peatland forests are rich with wildlife, including aquatic species ... Forest fires or peatland burning will threaten such wildlife populations besides releasing carbon into the atmosphere."