

NEW SUNDAY TIMES: The haze underscores the need for regional cooperation to douse the fires

Shrouded in smoke

THE country continues to experience hazy conditions. However, the problem has not been as bad this year as it was in 1997, 2005 or 2006. No emergency has been declared, face masks issued, aircraft grounded or flights diverted. Yet, air quality is continuing to deteriorate, and we are all upset over the tangible lack of progress in putting out the choking smoke. While Indonesia has shown it has responded to regional calls for action by banning the use of fire to clear land, bringing law-breakers to court, beefing up fire brigades, cloud seeding, installing early warning systems, monitoring fires and targeting to cut down the number of hot spots, the recent increase in hot spots and the pall of smoke still blanketing Malaysia and Singapore suggest that the measures have been less than effective.

What the perennial haze underscores is the need for regional cooperation to douse the fires. As the proposal for a rapid response fire-fighting squad, the deployment of firefighters to Indonesia in 1997 and 2005, and the collaboration on haze prevention initiatives in Riau province demonstrate, Malaysia is ready to help. And so are the other nations in Asean. But one stumbling block to coordinated regional collaboration is the Indonesian legislature's continued reluctance to ratify the 2002 Asean Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution. In the spirit of regional solidarity and as a sign of good faith that the Asean chair is serious about stopping the burning, it is hoped that Indonesia's Parliament will not oppose ratification when the government seeks its approval once again.

For now, the only thing that is clear is that the smoke has been arriving without fail every year. And the consequences are grave. Hazy and polluted air can cause upper and lower respiratory-tract infections, conjunctivitis and sore throat, because of dust particles, sulphur dioxide and nitrogen dioxide in the air.

When the government issued a haze emergency in Sarawak in 1997, as the air pollutant index reading topped 500, a joint study by Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia and Universiti Putra Malaysia found that public hospitals and clinics in the state reported more than 25,890 cases of respiratory complications and conjunctivitis. The joint study also concluded that constant exposure to air pollution can affect the intelligence of schoolchildren.

With the southwest monsoon blowing hot and dry this season, don't expect much improvement in air quality and visibility. All we can hope, as we have in the past, is that rain-laden clouds will come and put out the flames.

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