

'TIME RIPE TO RESTART TALKS WITH INDONESIA'

PM should start the ball rolling to review and update Asean haze pollution treaty

VEENA BABULAL
AND ADIB POVERA
KUALA LUMPUR
news@nst.com.my

THE time is ripe to revive transboundary haze talks with Indonesia. Sustainability expert Dr Mohd Yusoff Ishak said this was because the last agreement was ratified by Indonesia in 2014, more than 12 years after the republic signed the treaty on transboundary haze.

"Since the Asean Agreement on the Transboundary Haze Pollution was inked in 2002, and the 2015 tripartite talks (between Indonesia, Singapore and Malaysia) fell through, there have been no catastrophic haze incidences like that of 1997 or 2015, and the need to address the issue has fallen by the wayside.

"Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad should start the ball rolling for Asean by talking to (Indonesian President) Joko Widodo in a bid to review and update the treaty," said the senior lecturer from Universiti Putra Malaysia.

In 2015, Indonesia's dry season coincided with the El Nino phenomenon, which is associated with warmer and drier weather in the region. This worsened forest fires typical to the country, causing the region to suffer the worst haze crisis on record.

Air pollution levels skyrocketed, causing deaths and grounded planes.

The economic cost for Indone-

sia alone exceeded US\$16 billion (RM66.5 billion), more than double the damage and losses from the 2004 tsunami, which affected provinces in Indonesia and other countries, and equal to about 1.8 per cent of Indonesia's gross domestic product.

The haze in 1997 cost Southeast Asia an estimated US\$9 billion from disruptions to air travel and other business activities.

Dr Yusoff said it was important for Putrajaya to get on board to deliver the right message as a sustainable palm oil producer as the European Union had also moved to ban the use of palm oil as a biofuel.

"It's a sensitive mission because we, too, produce and sell palm oil for profit.

"But we need to emphasise that it's not a case of the pot calling the kettle black or intervening in another country's domestic affairs as it is now becoming an issue of catastrophic environmental implications.

"Indonesia must be told it does not have to give up its plantations as it, too, can follow sustainable practices under the cross-boundary Roundtable on Sustainable Oil Palm.

"This is especially important for farmers and smallholders as they are not bound by

any rules or monitored around the clock. They are also ultimately suppliers for big oil palm companies and producers."

He said Malaysia could play an advisory role by encouraging the cutting and pruning of trees using machines and composting to the neighbouring country's smallholders and farmers.

Dr Yusoff said this could be achieved by having Malaysian companies train farmers in affected villages, or having an agreement between the Malaysian Palm Oil Board and Indonesian authorities for the same purpose.



Dr Mohd Yusoff Ishak



The Kuala Lumpur skyline is shrouded in thick haze yesterday. (Bottom) The Penang Bridge can be barely seen through the haze in George Town yesterday. PIX BY HAFIZ SOHAIMI AND SHAHNAZ FAZLIE SHAHRIZAL

"It could take months to clear one hectare, compared with the slash-and-burn technique, but in the long run it is the more sustainable practice.

"Indonesia is constantly taking a reactive stance to haze. It has to be more proactive and prevent the issue altogether by communicating to its farmers that they cannot do this any more."

More than 6,000 firefighters, assisted by the police and military, are battling fires that have ravaged more than 42,000ha of forest and plantations in Indonesia since January.

The fires are raging in the provinces of Riau, Jambi, south Sumatra, and west, central and south Kalimantan, as well as the districts of Kota Dumai, Sambas and Ogan Komering Ilir, according to a report by the Antara news agency.

The firefighters are also using helicopters to water-bomb large tracts of land.

The burning of the forests and plantations for agriculture, as well as open burning, is not new in Indonesia and almost every year, this phenomenon sends the haze to neighbouring countries,



such as Malaysia and Singapore.

Data released by Indonesia's Environment and Forestry Ministry showed that between January and May this year, fires had destroyed 42,740ha of forest and plantations.

Indonesia's Meteorology, Climatology and Geophysical Agency had also forecast that the drought in Indonesia since June was expected to continue up to October and would worsen the situation.

Page 1 pic: Kuala Terengganu recorded an unhealthy Air Pollutant Index (API) reading of 107 at 7.15pm yesterday due to forest fires in Sumatra, Indonesia. The API reading for the city at 12pm was 115.