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ASEAN must step up action to halt Indonesian forest fires

Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM) welcomes the move by the Malaysian Prime Minister in reaching out to his Indonesian counterpart in addressing the increasing transboundary haze problem which is seriously affecting Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei and Indonesia.

We sincerely hope that urgent measures will be taken by the Indonesian authorities to halt the forest fires stemming from Indonesia, as monitoring data from the ASEAN Specialised Meteorological Centre (ASMC) has shown that the majority of the hotspots are seen in Kalimantan and Sumatra.

The recurrence of the haze problem raises serious concerns about the effectiveness of the ASEAN Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution which came into effect in 2014 and over the implementation of the 'Roadmap on ASEAN Cooperation towards Transboundary Haze Pollution Control,' which envisions ASEAN to be haze-free by 2020, which now seems like an impossible task.

It has to be acknowledged that the ASEAN Agreement lacks enforcement mechanisms or instruments for dispute-resolution and is therefore rather weak and not effective enough. It is premised mainly in promoting cooperation among the ASEAN member states and expects each country to undertake efforts at preventing forest fires in the respective countries, without infringing on the national sovereignty of a member state.

Given its inherent weakness, much more effective measures are needed urgently, including in expediting the establishment and operationalisation of the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Transboundary Haze Pollution Control (ACCT-HPC) in Indonesia to intensify further cooperation and action to combat the problems.

Since it is up to member states to ensure the prevention of forest fires in their respective countries, it is also vital to address why governments are not able to prevent the occurrence of forest fires.

Several research and reports have shown that there are serious systemic governance issues in Indonesia in relation to the forestry and plantation development sectors.

The governance framework for plantation development in Indonesia is complex, involving different levels of government, making central monitoring and enforcement a difficult challenge. Further, serious concerns have been raised by Indonesian civil society in relation to allegations of the lack of transparency in governance and existence of corruption in the forestry and plantation sectors.

To compound the problem, plantation companies involved in monoculture plantations such as oil palm and pulp and paper, often fail to comply with Indonesian laws and resort to the use of fire in land clearing activities.

Investigations must disclose the origins of these companies, because if Malaysian companies are also involved in such irresponsible actions, they must also be severely punished by our authorities. This should be in addition to actions taken by the Indonesian authorities on all companies responsible for the forest fires in Indonesia.

Without accepting these facts, it is indeed a challenge for the ASEAN governments to ensure a haze-free

vision in 2020.

There must be regional recognition that large corporate oil palm and pulp and paper plantations are causing not only deforestation but also are responsible for the forest fires in Indonesia.

Indonesian civil society groups like Friends of the Earth Indonesia (WALHI), have also consistently linked such large fires to corporate plantations. It is the large corporations and not the not small farmers who are the real culprits.

This year, as early as August 10, the Jakarta Post has already reported that the Riau police had named a palm oil corporation as a forest fire suspect, while Reuters on August 29 reported that the Indonesian police are investigating palm oil companies over the fires.

It is therefore important for us to stop the common false narrative that blames the fires largely on local farmers, where the cultivation of crops is on lands which are typically small.

Therefore, in order to help support Indonesia to put a stop to the forest fires permanently, three basic steps must be undertaken by ASEAN countries, including by our own government:

- First, there must be a clear understanding about the systemic causes of the forest fires and the corporate activities which are largely responsible for them. Effective action must be taken to stop these unsustainable forestry and plantation activities, including in preventing the use of fire in land clearing activities.
- Two, the ASEAN mechanisms of cooperation must be stepped up and improved to be effective, including through the establishment of the ACCT-HPC.
- Three, there must also be willingness for Malaysia and other ASEAN countries to ensure that corporations owned by their citizens are not involved in destructive and unsustainable activities abroad.

We therefore urge the federal government to lead the process in tackling the source of the problem and in ensuring that the region will never have to see another forest fire raging again, and make a haze-free ASEAN a reality and not a pipe dream.

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P r e s i d e n t
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