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## The unhealthy smell of money in forest fires

Indonesia's forests are once again on fire. Smoke from fires in Sumatra caused the worst haze conditions in Malaysia since 1997. An unhealthy smoky haze (a mixture of dust, ash, sulfur dioxide and carbon dioxide) has been covering Malaysia's main city Kuala Lumpur and 32 other towns. Schools were closed, and hospitals filled with patients complaining of respiratory ailments. Data from Indonesia's Riau Health Service reported that more than 1990 people have been experiencing upper respiratory infection and eye problems. Malaysia declared a state of emergency on August 11 as the air pollution index rocketed to extremely hazardous levels on its west coast. Rain and breezes scattered the smog last August 12, carrying it north.

Since the 1982-83 wildfires in Indonesia (which were recorded as the largest forest fires in that century), fire has been a recurring event in the country, causing massive damage within its borders as well as for its neighboring countries, such as Malaysia and Singapore.

In 1982-83, 1997-98 and 2002, millions of hectares of montane and lowland forests, of peat and swamp forest were burning while massive movements of population and animals fled the fires. The haze covered an area almost the size of Europe, disrupted aviation and shipping for months and caused serious health problems, choking even far distant cities where schools and airports had to be closed, and traffic slowed to a crawl as nothing could be seen beyond a short distance. The acrid smell of burning vegetation filled the air.

Though the El Niño event brought about in 1997 a severe drought, the fires were fuelled because many of Indonesia's forests have been badly damaged by logging: legal and illegal. Overexploitation opened up the forest canopy and, in the absence of rain, the forest became tinder dry.

On the other hand, the extensive forest conversion policy lies at the root of the forest fires problem. The Government of Indonesia plans to convert millions of hectares of forest to agricultural, oil palm and timber plantations. Every year, 1 to 2 billion metric tons of plant biomass is burned by plantation companies in their concessions as the cheapest tool to clear their land for oil palm and timber plantations. A large percentage of all wildfires result from that. In 1997, PT Torus Ganda, a plantation company operating in Riau, Sumatra, was the first of a large list of 176 companies publicly accused of starting fires to clear land.

Apart from crippling local economies, forest fires are major contributors of toxic gaseous and particle air pollutants into the atmosphere and are also sources of "greenhouse" and reactive gases, directly impacting on global warming and immediate weather patterns.

In 1997-98, forest fires in South-east Asia affected some 200 million people in Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand. In Indonesia, 41,000 people had diarrhea and 24,000 respiratory infections, 200,000 people were affected by food shortages in West Papua, and 413 deaths from starvation and cholera were reported in the territory at that time. Forest peoples' livelihoods were devastated and, as a result, food shortages were suffered in some areas.

Warnings of the World Health Organisation about health impacts of the smoke relate to short-term and long-term cancer implications. The fires increase the risk of acute respiratory infections, a major

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killer of young children. The comparison of medical data reported during the 1997/1998 forest fire events in South-east Asia with corresponding data in 1995/1996 revealed the following impact of smoke on public health: the number of cases of pneumonia increased 5-25 times in South-east Kalimantan (Borneo) and 1.5-5 times in South Sumatra; the number of outpatient visits with respiratory diseases in Malaysia increased 2 to 3-fold; in September 1997 in Jambi (Sumatra), the number of reported cases of upper respiratory tract infections was 50% higher than in the previous month. In the 2002 forest fires, the health and lives of about 4 million Indonesian people were affected in Central Kalimantan. Thirty years from now they will suffer from the effects of smoke inhalation in the form of serious respiratory illnesses, including lung cancer.

Some put the blame equally on local farmers and large plantation companies for the present fires. Dayak indigenous peoples in Kalimantan, have been traditionally carrying out shifting cultivation for thousands of years in tune with their natural environment (so-called “slash and burn” agriculture). They have experiences and strict traditional rules of using fire to clear small plots of agricultural land. Those traditional and low-impact practices cannot be compared with large-scale land clearance by plantation companies through equally large-scale fires that destroy huge areas of forest.

According to the experience of past fires, a terrible toll on their health lays ahead for the people affected by the present one. Also in line with past experience, oil palm plantation companies –mostly of Malaysian origin- have been identified by the Indonesian government as being responsible for the present fires. As usual the profit of large plantation companies is at the source of this tragedy. Their fires have an unhealthy smell of money.

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