

SOUTH EAST ASIA: SMOG/HAZE

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The Disaster

The combination of global climatic upheaval and destructive forestry practices have led to air pollution on a massive and disastrous scale in South East Asia. The "El Niño" weather phenomenon has delayed the onset of monsoon rains and caused exceptionally cold weather in parts of the region. The resulting drought has caused man-made forest fires in Indonesia to rage beyond control. Illegal "cut and burn" practices are regularly used to clear land on Sumatra, in the Kalimantan provinces of Borneo and in Irian Jaya. An estimated 500-600,000 hectares of mostly secondary forest is now burning. Fires have also started to penetrate into the peat layer, where they are almost impossible to put out. The prevailing south-east and south-westerly winds in the region have sent a thick cloud of smoke and micro-sized particles over most of Malaysia, Singapore and much of Indonesia and the Philippines.

Millions of inhabitants in the region are affected by the polluted air, and the East Malaysian state of Sarawak has declared a state of emergency. Thousands of people have been admitted to hospitals with respiratory problems. The situation is most serious for small children, the elderly and for people with respiratory diseases such as asthma. As the occurrence is very rare, little is known of potential long-term health effects. In large cities the situation is exacerbated by industrial and traffic pollution.

Government Action

Efforts are being made by the Indonesian authorities to fight the fires, and Malaysian fire fighters are helping on Sumatra. International technical assistance is also being provided but the gigantic scale of the disaster makes containment extremely difficult. It is unlikely that fires will be extinguished before monsoon rains come, which means that they could last for several weeks or even months.

Health authorities are advising people to avoid outdoor activities, use face masks and drink as much clean water as possible. Surgical face masks are being distributed in parts of the region, although their protecting effect is limited. High risk groups are advised to take special precautions. Embassies in Kuala Lumpur have advised their nationals with small children to leave the region and embassy staff are being rotated in and out of the country.

Red Cross/Red Crescent Action

Indonesia

As a member of Disaster Management Boards at the national and provincial levels, the Indonesian Red Cross (PMI) co-ordinates its action closely with the government. PMI volunteers are disseminating health information in schools. Four million face masks, donated by an oil company, will be distributed by the provincial disaster relief structures with the assistance of PMI volunteers. No decision to evacuate the population from the worst affected areas has been taken, but PMI has instructed its volunteers to assist in any such action.

An outbreak of cholera has been reported from East Kalimantan and confirmation from PMI is expected shortly, while a delayed PMI/ICRC assessment mission to Irian Jaya is also expected to report soon.

Malaysia

All branches of the Malaysian Red Crescent Society are on alert. Specially assigned volunteers, including medical professionals are on standby to provide first aid, health advice and ambulance transport, co-ordinated with national and local government. As of 27 September volunteers will seek out particularly vulnerable individuals in local communities to provide them with health advice and face masks, as well as to cater for the needs of the sick and the elderly. Priority in the first instance is being given to Sarawak and the densely populated state of Selangor. In the case of evacuation, which has been mentioned as a possibility in Sarawak, staff and volunteers are ready to assist.

Federation action

The Regional Delegation in Kuala Lumpur (RDKL) is in constant contact with the National Societies in Indonesia and Malaysia, as well as the ICRC Regional Delegation in Jakarta. Assistance to National Societies has been offered in case of need. Delegates are on standby for assessment missions. Instructions to safeguard the health of delegates and local staff in the RDKL have been issued. Possible future action will be taken on the basis of reports expected shortly from Indonesia.

The Federation will keep National Societies informed as new information become available.

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