

SOUTH EAST ASIA: SMOG/HAZE

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The Disaster

The fires continue to burn in Sumatra and Kalimantan, but changing wind patterns have brought relief from the haze over much of Malaysia during the last few days. Although satellite images now show fewer hot spots, it is unclear whether this really reflects a reduced number of fires. There is increasing concern over deep fires in the peat which is extremely dry after the prolonged drought. Much attention has been given to health effects in urban centres but there is a growing realisation of the potentially severe effects of hazardous pollution levels among the local Indonesian population living in the immediate vicinity of the fires in remote and inaccessible corners of Sumatra and Borneo. Some 20 million people live in these parts of Indonesia. There is still a dearth of information on the composition of the micro-sized particles in the smoke and the health consequences of inhaling them for long periods.

Government Action

UNDAC (United Nations Disaster Assessment and Co-ordination) and several governments have sent expert missions to Indonesia to assess needs for fire fighting assistance and health aspects of the disaster. Fire fighting equipment has arrived in-country. Since many airports are closed due to poor visibility field missions are either delayed or their participants have to travel by boat and road over very long distances. In a meeting between BAKORNAS, the national disaster management board, UN agencies and interested governments on 30 September, a general briefing and sharing of information took place. No decision on a co-ordinated plan of action has yet been reached.

Indonesian Red Cross Action

The Indonesian Red Cross yesterday received 225 million rupiah (approx. USD 80,000) from the Japanese Embassy in Jakarta for implementation of the first phase of its disaster response plan. The plan comprises three distribution components: 500,000 face masks; medicaments to treat respiratory ailments and gastrointestinal disease; and powdered milk. Kalimantan will receive 60% and Sumatra 40% of the assistance.

Face masks: 500,000 masks at a value of 150 million rupiah will be sent by boat and air to eight provinces in Sumatra and Kalimantan, with the largest quantities going to West Kalimantan and Riau. Distribution is being co-ordinated with SATLAK, the provincial disaster management board, with priority being given to children under five, the elderly, the sick, households depending on outdoor activities for their sustenance and low-income households. It is foreseen that masks will

need to be replaced as they become worn out. Due to the current high demand in Indonesia, it is difficult to find sufficient numbers on the local market.

Medicaments: Volunteers in local chapters of the Indonesian Red Cross, in co-ordination with health authorities, will open health posts in the worst affected local communities with free distribution of drugs worth 30 million rupiah for self-treatment of asthma and other respiratory ailments as well as gastrointestinal conditions. This initiative is intended to relieve the burden on local clinics and hospitals.

Powdered milk: As a temporary measure to strengthen the condition of children under five and pregnant mothers, it is planned to distribute milk powder, given safe conditions.

Federation Action

The Head of the International Federation's Kuala Lumpur Delegation and the regional health co-ordinator are now in Jakarta for an assessment of needs with the Indonesian Red Cross. A field trip to Kalimantan is planned for tomorrow (3 October), most likely by air as the local airport opened today.

With very limited information forthcoming to date on a unique disaster, the consequent needs and the longer term impact on the health of those affected, a detailed and technical assessment is essential in order to formulate an effective and coherent plan of action for responding fully to the emergency. A preliminary appeal to assist victims in Indonesia and Malaysia is foreseen in the coming days, to be followed by even more substantive action when the necessary data is to hand.

The International Federation Secretariat will continue to keep National Societies informed as events unfold and new information emerges.

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