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Call for permanent solution to haze problem

NST 21/6/13 MS 10

HAZARDOUS: Minister to meet Indonesian counterpart to discuss various measures

KUALA LUMPUR

THE haze situation took a predictable turn for the worse by engulfing Johor and its immediate neighbour, Singapore, prompting environmentalists to demand for a permanent solution to the annual health catastrophe.

While Malacca and Negri Sembilan were also badly affected, it was Johor that took the hardest hit with the Air Pollutant Index (API) readings in Muar and Pasir Gudang

breached 150, schools must halt all outdoor activities which involved students with high risk.

"If it reaches 250 or more, then the school should stop all co-curricular and outdoor activities.

"Any school located in areas with an API exceeding 300 should be shut down immediately, after which the school authorities are required to report to the District Education Office (PPD)," he said yesterday.

Ghafar urged school authorities to monitor and keep tabs on the haze



Haze blanketing Malacca city, which recorded an unhealthy API reading of 137 at 11am yesterday. Pic by Muhammad Hatim Ab Manan

oting past the hazardous level of 300, Muar recorded the highest reading of 383 at 11am and Pasir Gudang with 333 at 5pm.

Two other areas, Kota Tinggi and Larkin Lama, recorded 291 and 219 respectively at 5pm.

The health hazard forced authorities to close all 221 schools in Muar and Ledang for two days. A similar directive was also given to shut down all schools in Batu Pahat.

The decision was made by the state Education Department after many students reportedly faced breathing difficulties.

More schools may follow suit, with Education director-general Tan Sri Abdul Ghafar Mahmud saying yesterday that all schools in areas recording a reading of more than 300 would automatically be closed.

Ghafar said in cases where the API

situation from credible sources such as the media and the Department of Environment's website.

"Students are advised to wear masks. School authorities are urged to seek immediate medical attention for students found to be ill. The ministry has opened an operations room to monitor the phenomenon."

The Johor Health Department yesterday issued a reminder for the public, especially children and the elderly, to limit their outdoor activities and seek immediate treatment for breathing difficulties.

State director Dr Mohd Khairi Yakub said all API monitoring stations in Johor had showed unhealthy readings since Saturday.

In **Malacca**, state Health and Sports Department Development exco Datuk Ab Rahaman Ab Karim said government hospitals and clin-

ics across the state had seen a sudden influx of patients seeking medical attention for haze-related illnesses, with a jump of 2,781 patients since Monday.

Department of Environment director-general Halimah Hassan said it had alerted the National Security Council (MKN) to activate the haze management coordination committees in badly affected areas.

"The call for activation of the committees is in line with the National Haze Action Plan. It will be carried out first in Kota Tinggi and Muar as these places continue to show readings at worrying levels," she said yesterday.

She added that 83 hot spots were detected nationwide, with Sarawak recording 70. This was followed by Kelantan with six, Pahang (two), and Selangor, Malacca, Sabah and

Health Ministry to monitor haze-related cases

KUALA LUMPUR: The Health Ministry has set up an operations room to monitor any increase in haze-related health cases, said its minister, Datuk Seri Dr S. Subramaniam.

Dr Subramaniam said his ministry would ensure that there was sufficient manpower and facilities to handle any increase in haze-related cases at its clinics.

"The worsening haze situation in the country is worrying. The public should keep away from the outdoors as much as possible and go to air-conditioned areas," he said here last night.

In **Kuantan**, National Service Department director-general Datuk Abdul Hadi Awang Kechil said NS camps in Negri Sembilan, Malacca

and Johor had been ordered to halt all outdoor activities. He said other camps must hold activities inside multi-purpose halls if the Air Pollutant Index (API) exceeded 100.

"We are doing this as a proactive measure to safeguard the health and safety of NS trainees."

He said the department had issued the directive to all NS camp com-

mandants. All trainers must ensure that no outdoor activities are held when the API in their areas is deemed unhealthy.

There are seven NS camps in Johor while Malacca and Negri Sembilan have four and six camps respectively.

There are 28,000 youths undergoing or have just completed their NS stints at 81 camps nationwide.

Halimah said that a report by the Asean Specialised Meteorological Centre also revealed the number of hot spots in Sumatra, Indonesia, had decreased slightly to 173 yesterday from the previous 187 hot spots recorded on Wednesday.

Malacca city centre and Bukit Rambai in Malacca also recorded increases in API readings with 150 and 129 respectively.

In the Klang Valley, several areas, including Putrajaya, Port Klang, Kuala Selangor and Petaling Jaya, recorded moderate readings.

Natural Resources and Environment Minister Datuk Seri G. Palanivel said he would meet his Indonesian counterpart, Professor Dr Balthasar Kambuaya, on June 26 with Halimah to discuss measures to handle the haze condition affecting the region.

'Shame those involved'

KUALA LUMPUR: Environmentalists are demanding a permanent solution to the annual health threat posed by the haze.

Malaysia Nature Society President Prof Dr Maketab Mohamed said the haze problem was not just a simple environmental issue but one that concerned diplomacy between Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore.

"All the affected countries involved have the advanced technology to trace by satellite the exact locations of fires or hot spots causing the haze.

"Singapore has urged Indonesia to identify the culprits and take action but Indonesia has kept silent so far.

"Malaysia (and Singapore) are always willing to help. About 10 years ago, we sent our fire fighters to Indonesia to combat fires."

Environmental Protection Society Malaysia president Nithi Nesadurai suggested that companies involved in forest burning that contributes to the haze be publicly shamed.

"This is so they will not do it again in the future."

NST 21/6/13 MS 11

Schools in Muar and Batu Pahat closed

JOHOR BARU: All schools in Muar and Batu Pahat in Johor have been ordered to close for two days as the Air Pollutant Index (API) passed the unhealthy level because of the haze.

The closure involved 211 schools with 76,940 students in Muar, where the API reading reached the hazardous level of 383 yesterday, surpassing the 200 mark, which denotes the unhealthy level.

Johor education director Mohd Nor A Ghani said the 211 schools comprised of 40 secondary and 171 primary schools in Muar.

Nor said there had already been cases of students falling ill, especially those who were asthmatic.

The API reading in other areas, such as Larkin, Pasir Gudang and Kota Tinggi, was also over the unhealthy mark of 200.

Johor Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Mohamed Khaled Nordin, however, said there was no cause for alarm and that measures, like cloud seeding, would be taken if the situation got worse.

Khaled cautioned against open

burning in the state as anyone caught doing so would be issued the maximum fine.

In **Batu Pahat**, about 84,000 pupils were affected and 175 schools closed.

Teachers at SJK(C) Ai Chun (2), were seen standing outside the school informing parents that the afternoon session had been cancelled.

Headmaster Ho Weng Tack said the school received instructions from the district office about noon to close the school yesterday and today as a precautionary measure.

Batu Pahat Chinese Primary School Heads Council chairman Heng Hock Teng said the 38 Chinese primary schools in the district were told earlier this week to stop all extra-curricular and outdoor activities.

"We also informed all schools to work with their respective Parent-Teacher Associations to prepare masks for students," he said, adding most schools had already done so.

Headmistress of SJK (C) Hwa Jin Tan Seow Tin said the school had advised all parents to obtain additional masks for their children as

schools were short on masks.

She said the school gave away masks to students on Tuesday.

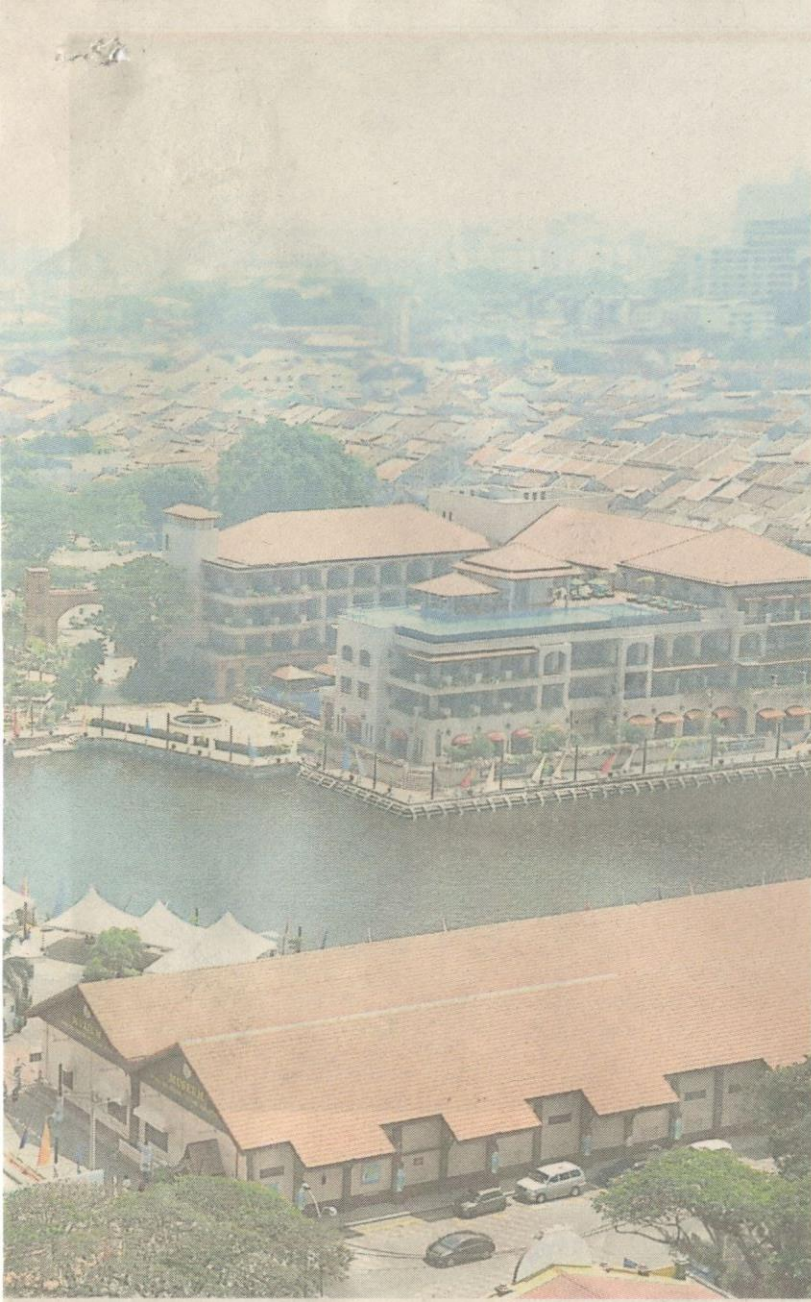
"Parents panicked on Wednesday as the weather became worse, with almost half the students in school absent or returning home halfway through the school session."

Meanwhile, the Johor Health Department has advised people, especially children and the elderly, to limit outdoor activities.

According to the Department of Environment (DoE) website, API readings of 0 to 50 are considered good, followed by moderate (51-100), unhealthy (101-200), very unhealthy (201-300) and hazardous (above 300).

Johor Health Department director Dr Mohd Khairi Yakub said since Saturday, all API monitoring stations in the state showed unhealthy readings of 101 to 200.

"The number of patients seeking treatment at outpatient clinics has also increased by as much as 21 per cent because of upper respiratory tract infections compared with the week before that."



Offer to help met with silence

SERI ISKANDAR: Malaysia has offered to help Indonesia battle hundreds of fires which have caused neighbouring countries to be blanketed by haze.

However, the offer has been met with silence from the Indonesian authorities.

Besides Malaysia and Indonesia, Singapore is also badly affected by the haze.

Deputy Natural Resources and Environment Minister Datuk Dr James Dawos Mamit said Malaysia had offered similar assistance previously, and was prepared to do so again.

"If they (Indonesians) need our help, we will offer whatever assistance we can.

"We have helped them before and we are more than happy to assist them again this time around," he said after closing the *Rimba & Alam Sekitar Tanggungjawab Anda* (Rasta) event organised by Universiti Teknologi Mara (Perak) at its campus here yesterday.

Present were UiTM Perak rector Professor Dr Zainab Mohamed and Rasta 2013 event organising chairman Associate Professor Dr Norlida Mohd Noor.

In 2003 and 2004, Pan Malaysian Air Transport's Short Skyvan was contracted to perform cloud seeding operations on behalf of the Malaysian Meteorological Services (MMS) under the Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation (Mosti). The Royal Malaysian Air Force C-130H Hercules had been mobilised to perform the task during the 2005 cloud-seeding mission over Sumatra, Indonesia.

Back in 1997, one of the worse periods of haze in recent history, the RMAF's Nuri helicopters were mobilised with bambi buckets to scoop water and put out forest fires there.

James said the Malaysian government had made known its intention to help the Indonesian authorities.

"We offered ways on how we should do it (put out the fires), but there has been no reply as yet."

Asked if the Indonesian authorities had given any assurances to address the haze problem this time around, James replied in the negative.

The assurance could only be garnered once all Asean member countries signed the Asean Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution. Until now, Indonesia has yet to do so.



Muar recorded a **hazardous API reading of 383** at 11am yesterday. Pic by Shahrul M. Zain

A combination of fire, weather, pollution

KUALA LUMPUR: The haze situation first appeared in Malaysian skies in 1982 and reached its peak in 1997 when the Air Pollutant Index (API) reading recorded 839 in Sarawak.

Haze has become an annual problem ever since, especially from May to September.

In 2005, the country saw one of the worst API readings in history after 1997, this time concentrated mainly in the peninsula, with Port Klang and Kuala Selangor recording the highest reading of more than 500.

A state of emergency was then declared in Port Klang and health officials warned citizens to stay indoors.

Haze is the result of various factors, including forest fires in Indonesia, hot weather, lack of rain, open burning and fumes from vehicles.

The government has taken national and regional measures to address the problem since the 1990s.

Campaigns were conducted to encourage people to car pool to reduce vehicular pollution.

Car owners were advised to check

on excessive exhaust fumes and factories were told to reduce smoke emissions.

The government also established the Malaysian Air Quality Guidelines, the Air Pollutant Index and the Haze Action Plan to check on the situation.

Malaysia and Indonesia had also signed a memorandum of understanding in 2008 to train community leaders and farmers in the Riau province in Indonesia on zero burning techniques and community fire-fighting.