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A Haze-Free ASEAN: Will the Vision Go Up in Smoke?

By Yang Razali Kassim

Synopsis

ASEAN ministers meet in Kuala Lumpur this week for urgent talks to tackle the latest haze problem in Indonesia that has choked neighbouring countries. Concrete plans must be made to work to prevent the vision of a haze-free ASEAN going up in smoke.

Commentary

THIS WEEK'S ASEAN meeting to tackle the haze problem has a huge responsibility on its hands. While its immediate challenge is the recent thick smog from Indonesia's Riau province that choked neighbouring countries, its significance is far greater than this.

Known officially as the 15th Meeting of the Sub-Regional Ministerial Steering Committee (MSC) on the Transboundary Haze Pollution, its role seems limited in scope. But the ASEAN pact that gives it purpose is not trivial. Known as the 2002 ASEAN Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution, it has global import. According to the ASEAN Secretariat, this is the first regional arrangement in the world that binds a group of contiguous states to tackle transboundary haze pollution arising from land and forest fires. Indeed, it is a "global role model" for the tackling of transboundary issues.

Big plans, small progress

Given the regional tensions triggered by the recent haze problem, ASEAN's vision of a haze-free region is obviously still far away. Yet ASEAN has a haze masterplan that is well-developed – harking back to the 1980s. Obviously, the problem is not lack of ideas and plans. An historical analysis of the haze issue will show how competent ASEAN has been in identifying the problem and mapping out a strategy.

First, a point that many may not realise: forest fires have been a feature of Southeast Asia's ecology since the Great Ice Age. More recently, recurring climate disturbances made wide areas of the region prone to large-scale wildfires. Indeed, the land and forest fires that hit the ASEAN region in 1997-1998 had been so severe that the United Nations labelled it "the most damaging in recorded history". Fires in peat soils have been a major contributor to the haze, and Indonesia has about 70 percent of the region's peatlands.

Apart from climatic factors, the haze phenomenon is the result of rapid demographic changes and increased human activity. According to the Secretariat's ASEAN Haze Action Online, the "pernicious practice of burning

forests to clear land for commercial purposes and the extraordinarily dry weather combined to produce a pall of catastrophic proportions". More than nine millions hectares of land were burnt, 6.5 million of which were forested areas.

Reflecting how old the issue is, there were reports as far back as the 1970s of haze blanketing Singapore skies, even hailstones. In June 1995, the regional grouping came up with an ASEAN Cooperation on Transboundary Pollution, which led to a Regional Haze Action Plan (RHAP). This plan set out collaborative measures among member states, with a three-fold objective: to *prevent* land and forest fires through better enforcement; to *mitigate* fires by strengthening regional fire-fighting capabilities; and to establish monitoring mechanisms on land and forest fires.

Different countries were assigned to spearhead each prong - Malaysia on prevention, Indonesia on mitigation and Singapore on monitoring. The centrepiece of the RHAP monitoring is the ASEAN Specialised Meteorological Centre (ASMC). Based in Singapore, the ASMC plays a leading role in long-range climate forecasting, early warning activities, and detection and monitoring of fires and haze. The RHAP also formed the ASEAN Coordinating Centre (ACC) for Transboundary Haze Pollution Control.

Member states in the sub-region – Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore as well as Brunei and Thailand – undertake national-level actions relating to the three prongs of prevention, mitigation and monitoring. Implementation of the action plan at the sub-regional and regional levels serves to complement these initiatives at the national level.

Implementation issues

Significantly, the previous sub-regional meeting – the 14th Meeting of the Sub-Regional MSC on Transboundary Haze Pollution – took place just eight months ago in Bali. This was seven months before the latest outbreak of the haze problem which at one point in June reached 401 on Singapore's Pollutant Standards Index (PSI). The Bali meeting reaffirmed the role of the ASMC and called for the use of technology to enhance hotspot monitoring, including the "critical role of digital geo-referenced concession maps in efforts to hold plantation companies and land owners responsible".

The ministers also agreed that member states undertake more deterrent and effective enforcement measures against offenders. At the same time, they agreed on the formation of an MSC Technical Task Force (MTTF) to develop a fire monitoring platform at the MSC level.

In the run-up to this week's MSC meeting, Singapore said it would seek several concrete outcomes, including Indonesia's urgent push to provide official and accurate land concession maps that would be crucial for nailing down errant companies.

Without these maps, Singapore's environment and water resources minister Vivian Balakrishnan was reported as saying, "it's very difficult for me to point fingers...authoritatively, bearing in mind that these activities occur in another sovereign land". Singapore also wanted a clear launch-date of the sub-regional haze monitoring system which is necessary to identify plantation companies that might have contributed to the peatland fires in Riau that led to the recent haze alarm.

Lack of plans, or lack of funds?

ASEAN clearly is not short of ideas, plans or strategies. Indonesia, the epicentre of the fires, too has well-laid plans to counter the haze problem. In fact, even before the latest episode, the 14th MSC noted, Jakarta had budgeted up to IDR 127 billion (about US\$12 million) for addressing land and forest fire issues at all levels. While this certainly underscored Indonesia's commitment to tackle the haze problem, it is not certain whether the money is enough, given the scale of the problem.

According to those familiar with the issue in ASEAN, the basic problem is three-fold: funding, implementation and sustainability at the provincial level. With no financial incentives, local authorities "just muddle along". Another reason is the difficulty of coordination across a huge area in Sumatra. "Each municipality or provincial authority will do something, but they cannot synchronise public education and civic action in a sustainable way," a former senior ASEAN official told *RSIS Commentaries*. In the end, he said, it is sustainability. Without sustainability, will the vision of a haze-free ASEAN go up in smoke?

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