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New Series on the Haze Issue (2)

Towards a Transboundary Haze-Free ASEAN by 2020: Some Immediate Actions

By Raman Letchumanan

Synopsis

The efforts towards a transboundary haze-free ASEAN by 2020 would require immediate actions on the following priority areas to be able to contain uncontrolled outbreak of fires in the near term.

Commentary

INDONESIA, WHERE most of the uncontrolled fires occurred this time around, has indicated that it needs three years to reasonably manage and control the fires that cause transboundary smoke haze. This timeframe is understandable given that this would involve the proper management of degraded peatlands, which in turn requires heavy infrastructure investment, such as canal blocking for effective rehabilitation of degraded peatlands.

Indonesia has long requested to host the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Transboundary Haze Pollution Control under the Haze Agreement, but indicated that it will only be able to operationalise the Centre after it ratifies the Haze Agreement. Now that it has been ratified, three aspects can be considered for immediate priority actions.

Commit to an ASEAN haze-free region by 2020

ASEAN should declare and make a firm commitment to ensure that the region is transboundary haze-free by the year 2020. Such a commitment will serve to cement the political will and resolve expressed at various instances into a collective regional

mission. It also focuses attention on instituting appropriate measures under the Haze Agreement to achieve the goal in a time-bound manner.

Over the past decade, ASEAN Member States (AMS) should have gained enough confidence in regional cooperation to make this happen. The future agenda under the Haze Agreement should reflect this commitment and work should focus on the most important aspects of the Haze Agreement.

Targets and milestones to measure progress towards this commitment should be established or enhanced. For example, the countries in the Mekong Region have established regional hotspot targets and national targets accordingly. Such targets enable them to move towards the planned reduction of incidences of land and forest fires. Indonesia is implementing its Comprehensive Plan of Action in Dealing with Transboundary Haze Pollution which contains time-bound cumulative hotspot reductions.

ASEAN should establish such annual regional targets up to 2020 for the whole region, and each AMS should come up with corresponding national targets to achieve them. Such hotspot targets would effectively demonstrate progress towards the reduction of land and forest fires and consequently the occurrence of transboundary haze.

ASEAN is also monitoring air quality for various pollutants through air pollution indices. Regional targets for air quality should be established aiming towards progressively better air quality in the region over time.

Any aberrations caused by unfavourable weather, for example, should act as the basis for heightened surveillance and action, rather than as an excuse for not meeting the targets and goal of a transboundary haze-free ASEAN.

Implement fully ASEAN's programme on peatland ecosystems

It is estimated that about 90% of smoke haze originates from degraded peatlands. The 2010-2014 ASEAN Peatland Forests Project (APFP) which has conducted ground level work in several peatland sites across ASEAN demonstrated the multiple benefits that sustainable practices can bring to various stakeholders, in particular to enhance community livelihood and reduce poverty, which serves to prevent fires in the first place.

In fact, there would have been no need to build expensive canal blocking and tube wells to rewet the dried degraded peatlands if proper water management has been undertaken in the first place. Based on this experience, ASEAN ministers responsible for haze have adopted the ASEAN Programme on Sustainable Management of Peatland Ecosystems (ASMPE) with the following six targets to be achieved by 2020:

- i. All peatland areas in ASEAN member states (AMS) be identified and inventorised;
- ii. Zero-burning uniformly practised and controlled-burning only in exceptional cases

to prevent any uncontrolled wildfires on peatlands, in order to eliminate any widespread smoke haze;

iii. Fire prone sites rehabilitated by focusing on the root causes of fire;

iv. Peatlands sustainably managed, sustainable livelihoods enhanced, and sustainable economic use mainstreamed;

v. Peatlands conserved to contribute to significantly reduced emissions of greenhouse gases and increased peatland biodiversity in the region;

vi. National and regional capacity enhanced to mainstream peatland management on a continuous basis through the ASEAN Peatland Management Strategy, and the respective National Action Plan on Peatland.

In fact, effective implementation of the ASMPE is key to achieving a transboundary haze-free ASEAN by 2020 – the second target above essentially incorporates this goal.

The implementation of the ASMPE should be led by national governments and investments rather than just external project funding, and should be done through a fully integrated, regionally coordinated and multi-country modality. It needs to be based on a longer-term planning and programmatic approach characterised by effective multi-stakeholder partnerships and enabling cross-learning and best practices synergies, in achieving sustainable peatlands ecosystems management.

Abundant successful tested solutions on proper peatland management are available in the region. Peatlands should no more be regarded as wastelands to be destroyed. Collective leadership of the governments is needed to make this happen.

Operationalise immediately ASEAN Centre on haze

Now that Indonesia has ratified the Haze Agreement, ASEAN should immediately operationalise the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Transboundary Haze Pollution Control (or ASEAN Centre for short). This is supposed to be the main operational entity of the Haze Agreement as provided for in Article 5.

Though much of the essential functions have been fronted by the ASEAN Secretariat over the years acting as the interim ASEAN Centre, many activities such as technical research, assistance and support, and coordination of joint emergency response could not be effectively carried out without this dedicated Centre.

This operating entity is essential to ensure that all the provisions of the Agreement are effectively implemented. It creates visibility for the Agreement, and acts as an independent entity and catalyst for governments and other stakeholders to converge, interact and collaborate on the necessary operational measures.

In particular, we have witnessed recent incidences of bilateral offers for joint emergency response to put out fires has been hampered due to sovereign and diplomatic considerations. The ASEAN Centre, as an independent regional entity,

would have been able to readily deploy joint emergency response resources in a timely manner through the existing pre-identified inventory of fire-fighting resources and standard operating procedures.

Certainly the ASEAN Centre needs to be adequately resourced to carry out its functions. No doubt AMS need no convincing to contribute and support the Centre, in view of the colossal damage and financial losses incurred each time there is a severe haze crisis.

Raman Letchumanan is a Senior Fellow with the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University. The views expressed here are strictly his own. Dr Raman was the person-in-charge of fire and haze issues, among others, at the ASEAN Secretariat from 2000-2014, and prior to that in the Malaysian Government. This is part of a new series on the haze issue.

Nanyang Technological University
Block S4, Level B4, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg