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New Series on the Haze Issue (4)

Towards a Transboundary Haze-Free ASEAN by 2020: Prevention and Collaboration

By Raman Letchumanan

Synopsis

This concluding commentary discusses the importance of preventive and preparedness actions and inclusive participatory collaboration with all stakeholders to sustain the efforts of a transboundary haze-free ASEAN beyond 2020.

Commentary

TO SUSTAIN the efforts of a transboundary haze-free ASEAN, it is important to remain vigilant and be prepared early enough to prevent any occurrence of fires. This calls for better early warning systems and swift deployment of fire-fighting resources even before the fires starts.

In the longer term, preventive activities should be intensified, through effective collaboration with various stakeholders at the local, national and international levels.

Enhance monitoring and surveillance actions

Currently, incidences of forest fires and weather conditions are monitored and reported by the ASEAN Specialised Monitoring Centre (ASMC) which provides hotspot information and weather and climate forecasts for the ASEAN region. Although hotspot data is useful, it can only inform past incidences. Furthermore, the accuracy of the hotspot information is important to identify actual locations and origins of fires.

ASEAN Member States (AMS) should consistently report and share fire-related

information with the ASMC to validate the accuracy of hotspot information and refine hotspot algorithm. The accuracy of the hotspot information is important to ensure quick response to genuine fires. This would allow fire-fighters to suppress incipient fires quickly while its scale is still manageable and to facilitate effective management of fire-fighting resources.

Efforts to enhance the Fire Danger Rating System (FDRS) – which indicates the potential of fires occurring based on weather and ground conditions - at both the national and regional level should be continued. A predictive FDRS that is capable of providing forecasts will be very useful in making advance preparations to pre-position necessary fire-fighting assets in the fire prone areas.

Work on haze trajectory modelling should be revived on a regional collaborative basis among relevant experts, to forecast the movement of transboundary haze, so that preparations can be made early enough to mitigate the impact of haze.

ASEAN has adopted the Haze Monitoring System (HMS) proposed by Singapore to identify perpetrators of fires for monitoring and enforcement purposes. However, its implementation has stalled because of the difficulties expressed by governments to share digitised maps of concession areas. AMS should immediately operationalise the HMS, through maps available from governments and other reputable sources, as it can serve as a strong deterrent to potential violators.

Shift towards better prevention and preparedness

The Haze Agreement contains extensive provisions on national emergency response, and joint emergency response and assistance in case an affected country is not able to tackle forest fires on its own. ASEAN has developed a very comprehensive SOP for joint emergency response. While there had been exchange of fire-fighting resources before, it is regrettable that Indonesia has long delayed the acceptance of such offers this time. It is important that in future such joint emergency response should be readily deployed well before the fires get unmanageable through the fully functioning ASEAN Centre for Transboundary Haze Pollution Control.

The Panel of ASEAN Experts should be fully utilised to assist affected countries in assessing the situation on the ground and to advise their own governments on the necessary assistance required as a pre-emptive measure before fires get out of control.

Nevertheless, as required under the Agreement, it is the responsibility of the respective AMS to control any fires within their territory. AMS should be properly prepared based on a possible worst case scenario. Land and forest fires can flare up and spread widely and quickly, most of them in remote and inaccessible places. In such case, urban fire-fighting equipment or techniques are ineffective. Therefore, fires are best put out early before it gets out of control.

The communities in remote areas should be trained and provided with the necessary appropriate fire-fighting equipment. Of course, communities should be discouraged from using fires; and the provision of small farm equipment on a collective basis could help them to clear land without fires, and to put out fires quickly as they occur.

Private enterprises, especially plantation companies should not only focus on mitigating fires in their own concessions, but also prepare and assist the communities around them to suppress fires or to clear land using the appropriate land clearing equipment.

Proactively and effectively involve all stakeholders

The Haze Agreement, through Article 3(5), mandates Parties, in addressing transboundary haze pollution, to involve, as appropriate, all stakeholders, including local communities, non-governmental organisations, farmers and private enterprises.

As far as haze is concerned, almost everyone has been affected and is clamouring for action to end this long standing problem. Governments can mobilise these stakeholders in an effective manner to create a proactive partnership that allows them to mutually assist each other in resolving the problem.

For it to happen, governments have to be transparent and build trust among stakeholders. Media communication ought to reflect the ground situations correctly. There should be wider dissemination of new initiatives such as the Singapore Transboundary Haze Pollution Act and Indonesia's One Map Policy so that there is better appreciation of its impact on preventing fires.

The public is increasingly turning the heat on those recalcitrant plantation enterprises which have the capability and resources to prevent fires in their concessions. These enterprises should follow strictly their declared environmentally sustainable practices and corporate social responsibility to ensure no fires occurs within their jurisdiction or vicinity.

The most affected community are those in the vicinity of fires. Their fundamental concern is to earn a livelihood and not about fires that cause haze. The ASEAN Peatland Project has demonstrated that a win-win situation can be created if proper farming practices are adopted by the communities in and around the peatlands. The communities not only gain sustainable livelihood, but also protect the peatland eco-system.

Nexus between haze agreement and global accords

Fires and haze are just symptoms of a larger issue concerning not only the environment, but also the broader social, economic and political dimensions. Wild fires release huge amount of greenhouse gases, especially fires from peatlands which is essentially carbon-rich soil. Wild fires can wipe out huge tract of forests and destroy biodiversity and unique ecosystems such as peatlands.

Therefore, the Haze Agreement does contribute directly towards achieving the objectives of several global accords such as the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, the Convention on Biological Diversity, and the recently adopted UN Sustainable Development Goals.

Sadly, there is a general feeling among AMS, and more so among the global

community, that fires and haze are rather unrelated to these global issues. Hence the ownership of and the commitment to the implementation of the ASEAN Haze Agreement is rather lukewarm or unenthusiastic.

Hopefully, the ASEAN Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution will get fresh vigour and due recognition as the primary means to realising an ASEAN transboundary haze-free region by the year 2020, after this current prolonged record-breaking haze crisis.

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