

Indonesia's Land Fires and ASEAN's Recurring Haze Crisis

Malaysia and Brune Darussalam are once again facing a transboundary haze crisis that comes mainly from forest and land fires in Sumatra and Kalimantan, Indonesia. This condition is reminiscent of the major crisis in 2015 which had a serious impact on health and the environment in the Southeast Asian region. In Serian, Sarawak, the air pollution index (API) even reached 192, while a number of other areas in Sarawak and Peninsular Malaysia also experienced poor air quality. This condition is expected to last until the end of September.

This issue has actually become the main concern of ASEAN which gave birth to the ASEAN Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution which has been in effect since 2003 and regulates cooperation in the prevention, monitoring, mitigation, and law enforcement of fires that cause transboundary pollution. Indonesia itself ratified the agreement in January 2015. However, its implementation is still a problem. In the current haze crisis, Indonesia is considered to have the greatest responsibility because most of the fire points are in Indonesian territory. The Indonesian government has indeed carried out extinguishings, issued warnings, and arrested a number of parties, but these steps are considered more reactive than preventive.

According to some Indonesian experts and activists, the main problem of the recurrence of fires that produce haze is the weak prevention and indecisiveness of the Indonesian government in supervising and taking action against corporate actors involved in land clearing practices.

Coordinated Attacks Shakes Southern Thailand Amid Peace Efforts

A series of coordinated arson and sabotage attacks took place at more than 70 locations in four southern Thai provinces, namely Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat and Songkhla. At least 78 incidents were reported, targeting government buildings, shops, vehicles, power poles and railway lines. At least three people were injured and train services in parts of Narathiwat were halted.

Thailand's predominantly Malay Muslim region has faced decades of armed conflict. Since 2004, more than 7,800 people have been killed as a result of conflicts between the Thai government and insurgent groups, most notably the National Revolutionary Front (BRN) which fights for autonomy or independence in the region.

The latest attack comes as the Thai government is trying to revive peace talks with the BRN that have been facilitated by Malaysia. The Thai government said the attack was likely a retaliation against security operations and the eradication of illegal activities that are a source of funding for the insurgent group.

Philippines Accelerates Military Modernization and Drone Capabilities

The Philippines plans to expand the use of unmanned systems, especially through the development and procurement of drones, as part of its military

modernization. Defense Minister Gilberto Teodoro conveyed the plan during a budget discussion in Congress.

The government is proposing a 6.3% increase in the defense budget by 2027, from about 305.5 billion pesos to higher. Meanwhile, the budget for the military modernization program is planned to reach 50 billion pesos (about US\$810 million), an increase of 25% compared to the current year.

In addition to drones, the Philippines also plans to acquire missile-guided corvettes and various key defense assets to strengthen external defense capabilities. The development of drones is not only directed at the procurement of devices, but also at communication capabilities, networking, operational integration, and the utilization of AI.

The policy is closely linked to the Philippines' escalating tensions with China in the South China Sea, particularly over incidents in the territory claimed to be within the Philippines' exclusive economic zone. The United States has also provided four solar-powered naval drones to assist with maritime surveillance of the Philippines.

Malaysia: Anwar Expands Subsidy Policy Amid Cost of Living Pressure

Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim announced a number of policies to respond to the rising cost of living while helping the community and business actors. The policy came into effect on September 1, including returning the quota for purchasing subsidized fuel RON95 for Malaysians to 300 liters per month, after previously being cut to 200 liters. The quota for purchasing diesel for certain user groups was also increased to 400 liters per month.

The government has also increased the budget for school maintenance, digital health systems, small business financing, and provided free access to a number of AI-based applications for citizens aged 18-30. The turnover limit for companies that obtain exemptions from e-invoicing obligations has also been raised to RM3 million per year. Anwar emphasized that economic growth must be felt by the public again. This is important because although the Malaysian economy grew by 6% in the second quarter of 2026, the government is facing public pressure due to the rising cost of living.

In addition to the economic context, this policy was born as a result of political pressures on the Anwar Ibrahim government which was considered to be stuttering in reforming and handling several corruption problems in Malaysia. In addition, Anwar's coalition party, Pakatan Harapan, in the last two months suffered consecutive defeats in the state elections in Johor and Negeri Sembilan.