

Nov 6, 2006

Asean needs help to tackle haze: PM

International expertise needed to help nip problem in the bud, he says

By Lynn Lee

WITH the haze problem so severe, affected Asean nations cannot free the region from the shroud of smoke by themselves, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said yesterday.

They will need the international community to lend their expertise to tackle this urgent problem, he added.

The haze problem is a difficult one, as the fires which cause the blanket of smoke occur all over Indonesia.

'To tackle this at its roots - that means before it starts burning, to prevent the fires from being started - we will need resources and we need enforcement,' he said.

Officials in Indonesia cite farmers, plantation owners and workers for starting fires to clear land during the dry season from June to August.

Noting that many Singaporeans were upset about the haze, Mr Lee said he fully understood why. The smoke took a toll on people's health, and limited their outdoor activities. It degraded their quality of life.

Even the economy was not spared: 'If you have haze like this every year, tourism will be affected. Our integrated resorts won't look as beautiful as they ought to.'

He said that in a phone call three weeks ago, Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono pledged to take steps to prevent the haze in future.

Indonesia has made some headway, Mr Lee noted at the launch of this year's Clean and Green Week. It set aside funds for efforts to fight the haze, and leased two Russian firefighting planes.

Dr Yudhoyono was serious about solving the problem and given his personal focus, Mr Lee was sure Indonesia would work towards a long-term haze solution.

The occurrence of the haze, which has affected Singapore seasonally for almost a decade, is unlikely to disappear soon. Since the end of September, the Pollutant Standards Index has hit unhealthy levels - above 100 - three times.

Things might get worse next year if the El Nino weather effect returns, said Mr Lee. This could prolong Indonesia's dry season by some four months.

Singapore would continue to do its bit by working with Indonesia and Asean on a long-term action plan. But as the problem was severe, there was also a need to bring in other countries and organisations to tackle this urgent problem together, he said.

Asean environment ministers have formed a committee to oversee measures to fight the haze.

Officials agreed last week on an action plan whereby, among other things, Asean countries can work directly with Indonesian districts in regions such as Kalimantan and Sumatra to tackle forest fires.

'These are positive moves, but they are just first steps. They have to be followed up in order to tackle the problem,' Mr Lee told students, grassroots leaders and residents at Republic Polytechnic.

Speaking to reporters later, Environment and Water Resources Minister Yaacob Ibrahim said details of the action plan, which he described as 'comprehensive', would be confirmed this week when Asean environment ministers meet in Cebu.

The plan would then be put to Asean leaders for endorsement at their December summit and be operational by early next year.

Dr Yaacob said Singapore was keen to work with authorities in some of the 35 districts in which hotspots have been identified.

International experts could also help solve 'difficult' problems, such as dealing with peat fires, which are hard to put out. They could also work with the Indonesian authorities on alternative ways to clear land.

Indonesian officials had shown 'a certain resolve' in tackling the problem, he said.

'So we take it at face value. We will work with them.'

But there was no snap solution: 'I don't think we can solve this within a year. It will take a long-term solution. We have to see if farmers are prepared to change habits, whether the Indonesian authorities are prepared to clamp down on errant plantation owners.'

'But the more important thing is that there is a plan of action that we'll put in place.'

lynnlee@sph.com.sg