

Fourth ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Haze

Singapore, 19 June 1998

JOINT PRESS STATEMENT

1. ASEAN Environment Ministers met in Singapore on 19 June 1998 to review the progress made in the implementation of the ASEAN Regional Haze Action Plan. The Ministerial Meeting was preceded by the Eighth Meeting of the ASOEN Haze Technical Task Force on 18 June 1998.
2. The Ministerial Meeting was attended by H.E. Yang Amat Mulia Pengiran Indera Wijaya Pengiran Dr Haji Ismail bin Pengiran Haji Damit, Minister of Development, Brunei Darussalam; H.E. Dr Panangian Siregar, State Minister for the Environment, Indonesia; H.E. Datuk Law Hieng Ding, Minister of Science, Technology and Environment, Malaysia; H.E. Mr Victor O. Ramos, Secretary of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources, the Philippines; H.E. Mr Yeo Cheow Tong, Minister for the Environment and Minister for Health, Singapore; H.E. Mr Leuane Sombounkhan, Ambassador, Embassy of Lao PDR to Singapore; H.E. U Myo Myint, Myanmar Ambassador to Singapore; H.E. Mr Adisak Panupong, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary, Royal Thai Embassy in Singapore; Dr Truong Manh Tien, Deputy Director-General of National Environment Agency, Vietnam; and Dr Filemon A. Uriarte Jr, Director of Functional Cooperation Bureau of the ASEAN Secretariat and their respective delegations.
3. The Meeting was chaired by H.E. Mr Yeo Cheow Tong, Minister for the Environment and Minister for Health, Singapore.

Review of Current Situation

4. The Ministers exchanged information on their experiences in dealing with the recent fires in the region. They noted that though heavy rains have helped put out the fires in Kalimantan, new fires were already spotted in some parts of the region, particularly in Sumatra. The Meeting noted that firm measures should be taken immediately to put out these fires before they went out of control. The Ministers also called on the international community to provide the necessary assistance to address these fires.

Regional Haze Action Plan (RHAP)

5. The Ministers discussed the progress made in achieving the objectives set out for preventive measures, regional monitoring mechanisms, and firefighting capability under the Regional Haze Action Plan (RHAP). The meeting noted the outcome of the ASEAN Preparatory Meeting on the National Haze

Action Plans (NHAPs), held on 8–9 June 1998, in Manila, the Philippines. The Ministers agreed on the importance to expedite the implementation of these national plans and the need to incorporate the implementation details into the RHAP. The Ministers further noted that the NHAPs must be complemented by public education efforts and strict enforcement against open burning. To this end, ASEAN governments should consider the inclusion of presumptive provisions in their national laws to discourage landowners from allowing open burning activities to take place on their land.

6. The Ministers noted the El Nino was at its final stages and that the region could expect the situation to either return to normal or further develop into a La Nina event towards the end of the year. The Ministers also took note that, as the region was entering into the dry season, there was a renewed threat of fires in the months ahead.

7. The Ministers noted that the ASEAN Specialized Meteorological Centre (ASMC) had provided valuable services benefiting the region's transboundary pollution assessment capabilities in the areas of seasonal climate forecasting, intranet-posted NOAA and GMS satellite images, including smoke-haze maps, regional wind and experimental haze trajectory forecasts.

8. The Ministers recognized that the implementation of the RHAP would have to address both immediate and long-term concerns. In this regard, the Plan must focus on measures to prevent fires, the provision of adequate firefighting equipment, technology to be adopted, as well as the human resource requirements. The Ministers agreed that land-use policies in [some] countries involving the conversion of large tracts of forest and peat lands into plantations should be carefully reviewed to discourage open burning practices.

Sub-Regional Firefighting Arrangement

9. The Ministers noted that Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore have been working closely to establish the co-operative mechanisms to implement the sub-Regional Firefighting Arrangement (RFA) for Sumatra. The Ministers agreed that the key objective of the RFA for Sumatra would be to prevent fires and not to allow the scale of any fires to deteriorate into a disaster level. The Ministers also noted that Brunei Darussalam would take the lead as the Chairman of the Working Group on the RFA for Kalimantan which would include Indonesia and Malaysia. The main purpose of the RFA for Kalimantan was to prevent and contain any fires there.

10. The Ministers agreed that both the RFAs for Sumatra and Kalimantan should be implemented as soon as possible. The Ministers agreed that the RFA for Sumatra would involve two key activities. The first would be to conduct aerial surveillance operations quickly to detect fires early. The meeting noted that Indonesia had proposed an aerial surveillance plan using their own equipment and manpower resources. The second activity would be to improve the communication network involving all relevant agencies at the provincial and district levels in Sumatra to ensure the immediate transmission of information on fire outbreak to ground firefighting forces. Malaysia and Singapore agreed to assist Indonesia in implementing the aerial surveillance plan. While Malaysia would provide the necessary expertise and training for firefighting activities, Singapore was ready to provide the necessary communication equipment.

11. The Ministers noted that a RFA funding mechanism had been established and that the Global Environment Facility (GEF)/UNEP was ready to fund the RFA activities. The Ministers noted that aerial surveillance is a costly operation and international assistance would be needed in this regard.

International Assistance

12. The Ministers expressed their appreciation to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)

for its prompt attention and assistance in dealing with the region's forest fires and haze situation. The Ministers noted that, on UNEP's initiative, the GEF has adopted a project amounting to US\$750,000 on "Emergency Response to Combat Forest Fires in South East Asia" to support existing efforts to deal with fires and haze. The Ministers welcomed UNEP's leading role in co-ordinating assistance to combat and control regional fire and haze on behalf of ASEAN. The Ministers urged UNEP to actively follow-up with potential donors on its plan to establish the US\$10 million fund for firefighting and other related measures. The Ministers also called upon UNEP to mobilize and channel funds and resources towards priority activities such as establishing the aerial surveillance regime in Sumatra.

13. The Ministers welcomed the U.S. offer of assistance under the Southeast Asian Environmental Initiative amounting to US\$4 million to deal with the regional haze problem. The U.S. also informed the meeting that an additional sum of US\$2 million would be provided to assist Indonesia in firefighting operations.

14. The Ministers noted that the Inception Workshop for the Regional Technical Assistance (RETA) project was held on 12 May 1998, in Jakarta. The RETA project was formulated with financial assistance from the ADB and ASEAN Secretariat as the implementing agency. The main objective of the RETA project is to strengthen the capacity of ASEAN to prevent and mitigate transboundary atmospheric pollution. The Ministers welcomed the RETA project which would help strengthen the region's medium and long term capability in dealing with the challenge of land and forest fires and haze.

15. The Ministers also welcomed the increasing role of the Non-Government Organizations and the private sector in regional, national and local efforts to combat, prevent and mitigate fires. To this end, the Ministers welcomed regular dialogue between NGOs and the ASOEN Senior Officials on the forest fires and haze matters.

Date and Venue of Next Meeting

16. The next ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Haze would be held on 31 July 1998 in Malaysia.

17. The Ministerial Meeting was held in the traditional spirit of ASEAN cordiality and solidarity.

SOURCE: ASEAN Secretariat World Wide Web site <<http://www.asean.or.id/function/prhaze4.htm>>.