



IDSS COMMENTARIES (115/2006)

IDSS Commentaries are intended to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy relevant background and analysis of contemporary developments. The views of the authors are their own and do not represent the official position of IDSS.

Clearing up ASEAN's Hazy Relations

*Sofiah Jamil**

25 October 2006

THE haze knows no boundaries. A Singaporean mother once tried to explain this foggy phenomenon to her son by telling him that “the whole of Singapore is smoking”. The boy replied: “No, Singapore is taking in second hand smoke”. Amusing as that may be, the air inhaled as a result of the forest fires in neighbouring Indonesia, does, in fact, have the potential to be as lethal as passive smoking. The air quality in Malaysia and Singapore over the past few weeks has deteriorated significantly, with PSI levels remaining largely in the unhealthy range. This has caused many people to remain homebound to avoid falling ill. Economies have had to bear the brunt of this. Outdoor coffee shops and restaurants note a lag in business by about 15 to 20% while poor visibility has become a hazard to ships’ navigation, with Indonesia reporting its first smog-related accident when two Indonesian vessels recently collided in Jambi, Sumatra. It has also delayed flights and retarded Sarawak’s vital helicopter service, often used in remote areas. The overall sentiment amongst these regional passive smokers is one of disappointment and increasing resentment towards Indonesia.

Indonesia’s ‘Forgotten’ Concrete Steps

ASEAN states, in particular Singapore and Malaysia, have over the years expressed concern over the Indonesian government’s lack of progress in alleviating the situation. Indonesia, however, has engaged in a series of projects as early as the 1990s to tackle the haze, which ironically, have had more assistance from beyond fellow ASEAN members, such as the European Union. More recently, there has been technical collaboration between the Ministry of Forestry in Indonesia and Japan Cooperation Agency (JICA) known as Forest Fire Prevention Management in Indonesia (1996 – 2006). The project aimed to improve early warning and detection systems, support forest fire prevention activities as well as training to local communities and local government staff to develop effective forest management techniques. The projects have made some improvements. For instance, the early detection systems have increased Indonesia’s ability to detect hot spots thus allowing officials to be notified of forest fires swiftly. More than 6000 hotspots have been detected throughout Indonesia this year, including those in remote areas.

Another project with positive outcomes is the joint venture by Wildlife Habitat Canada and Indonesia’s Forest Protection and Nature Conservation directorate. The project was aimed at battling peatland fires – a common source for forest fires and regional haze – by irrigating dry peatlands. This is done via simple local methods of blocking existing canals that surround peatlands with logs and sandbags. This project proved to be a success as not only has it put an

end to fires but also allowed forests to recover and created a new food source with fishes breeding in the blocked off canals.

Although requiring four years to complete, such sustainable solutions with long term benefits ought to have been supported by ASEAN member states. Regrettably, none of them, not even those inflicted by the haze, funded the project. Rather they have channeled most of their funds to more expensive short term solutions. Cloud seeding, for instance, costs the Sarawak state government RM50,000 per cloud seeding trip. Moreover, success is not always guaranteed as it is often difficult to find 'rain-bearing clouds' during the dry season. As such, the lack of effective use of funds by ASEAN states has also contributed to the current prolonged haze situation.

Then again, it is perhaps due to the Indonesian government's slow response and lack of effort in addressing the issue that has deterred its neighbours from offering financial assistance. While legislation outlawing the use of fire for land clearance has been established and satellite data indicate that a significant number of hot spots are located in private plantations, Indonesia has done very little beyond that. The rate of prosecuting law breakers especially in remote areas is still slow, if not stagnant. ASEAN members have been critical of this. Even so, the concept of state sovereignty impedes ASEAN from being able to take any form of action to coerce Indonesia to act responsibly. The 2002 ASEAN agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution clearly illustrated this as Indonesia has yet to ratify it.

While Indonesia expressed that it would ratify the agreement, it did not specify a timeframe and suggested that action would occur once the Indonesian legislature agreed to it. Whether that may be a fact or merely a way of buying time, the result is the same – hazier days to come. There has, however, been a glimmer of hope for ASEAN since the recent Sub-Regional Ministerial Meeting on Transboundary Haze Pollution in Pekanbaru, especially after President Yudhoyono's apology to Indonesia's neighbours for the haze problem.

What can be done

Although much still remains to be seen, where does this then leave ASEAN's haze-inflicted states, and can anything be done to improve the situation? There are two broad points that ASEAN should bear in mind for the time being. Firstly, ASEAN states, including their citizens, must exercise more patience and understanding towards Indonesia's colossal predicament. With the bird flu epidemic and reconstruction after tsunamis, earthquakes and mud floods stretching Indonesia's pockets, the haze would not be one of Indonesia's top priorities at the moment. Moreover, the process of detaining forest fire culprits is itself difficult. Masterminds of the forest fires are often companies with land concessions, who employ locals to use their traditional agricultural methods to clear the land. These companies would then evade responsibility for fires by claiming their land had been encroached upon by these small farmers who would have to bear the brunt of fines by the government due to a lack of evidence to prove otherwise.

Critics may argue that Indonesia's neighbours have been patient for long enough. Sad to say, they do not have any other choice. It would be unwise to pursue hawkish measures against Indonesia as it would jeopardize decades of strong socio-economic and historical links. Fortunately, there is still hope for the region. The post-Suharto era has witnessed a greater deal of freedom of expression by Indonesians, via the media and public protests. With such intense pressure from within the state and regionally, President Yudhoyono has to take

decisive and effective action as soon as possible.

Secondly, ASEAN leaders must persevere to sustain dialogue and continue to foster greater understanding amongst its member states. Some progress has been made during an ASEAN conference in May earlier this year. ASEAN members made a significant step in establishing a Peatland Management Strategy (2006-2020). Not only were solutions to effectively stop peatland fires discussed but the plan also highlighted the need to employ measures that ensure sustainable development and multi-stakeholder and multi-agency involvement. The meeting also acknowledged its past errors, such as channeling resources to fire suppression and emergency purposes rather than preventive measures. Confidence building measures may also assist in improving strained relations between Indonesia and its neighbours and also perhaps increase the former's efforts to ratify the 2002 agreement.

Dialogue and consensus have always been fundamental mechanisms of ASEAN and require a great deal of endurance to see solutions through to the end. The haze issue is no exception; a great deal of time is needed to establish sustainable and efficient preventive measures. By sticking to these inherently ASEAN ideals, it is possible to eventually clear up South East Asia's hazy atmosphere.

* *Sofiah Jamil is a Research Analyst at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies (IDSS), Nanyang Technological University, where she is attached to the Consortium on Non-Traditional Security Studies in Asia (NTS-Asia).*