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OPINION

Up in smoke: Fires in Russia and Indonesia

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The recent episode of heatwaves and the resulting fires in West and Central Russia are said to be the worst in Russian history.

Indeed, this event corresponds with the fact that the global temperature recorded for 2010 is the warmest to date, according to the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA).

However, closer examination reveals that the outbreak of fires in Russia is similar to the Indonesian experience — particularly in 1998 and 2006 — when peatland fires caused incidents of transboundary haze which affected other ASEAN countries.

Moreover, Russia and Indonesia show similarities in the cause and impacts of the fires and to a lesser extent, the responses to address the problem.

According to Wetlands International, 80 to 90 percent of the thick smog covering Moscow was caused by fires in peatland areas, as was the case for the Southeast Asian transboundary haze that stemmed mainly from Sumatra, Indonesia.

It should come as no surprise then that Russia and Indonesia are amongst the top three countries worldwide with the largest peatland occurrences (i.e. drained peatlands).

The socio-economic impact of the fires show a transnational reach. The smog and haze that engulfed Moscow and Southeast Asia (mainly Singapore and Malaysia) respectively have caused a dip in economic activity, especially in trade and tourism, due to poor visibility.

Adverse health implications have also been a concern in both countries, with advisories given to the elderly, children and those pregnant or suffering from respiratory ailments to avoid the outdoors.

The Russian fires have also an added dimension to adverse health effects, given the spread of fires to neighboring Ukraine, and in particular to areas affected by the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear disaster.

This may increase the potency of radioactive particles that still remain, thereby affecting residents in the area. In Russia itself, concern looms with news of fires spreading close to Russia's leading nuclear research center in Sarov.

To make matters worse, such adverse consequences have not even taken into account the effects from higher temperatures. For instance, Russia and Indonesia have both experienced losses in agricultural output due to the lack of rainfall for crops.

This has threatened their sufficiency in wheat and rice respectively. As a result, Russia has imposed a ban on wheat exports to safeguard domestic food prices.

Even so, recent news reports have suggested that the ban has not stopped the price of bread in Moscow increasing by 20 percent. The situation was much grimmer in Indonesia in 1998 as the reduced rice production coupled with the fall of Soeharto sent the price of rice skyrocketing by 300 percent.

In terms of responses to the fires, national efforts have for the most part been inefficient. In the case of Indonesia, it was faced with socio-political upheavals immediately after the fall of Soeharto and hence issues pertaining to the environment were put on the backburner.

Moreover, decentralization in Indonesia in subsequent years meant that not only did local and provincial governments enjoy greater political power, it also allowed them to behave like authoritarian leaders in their own right.

In a bid for a quick buck, many local leaders gave concessions to private firms rather freely. These firms often adopted the slash and burn method for land clearing thereby contributing to the transboundary haze even till 2006.

In Russia's case, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin displayed a highly active response in mobilizing available resources to mitigate the spread of the fires. Nevertheless, Russia does seem to experience some obstacles, which Indonesia had initially experienced. The main ones are the lack of resources dedicated to the forestry sector — exacerbated by corruption — and difficulties in reaching remote villages affected by the fires.

This does not suggest that Indonesia is now free from these obstacles; rather the Indonesian government is pressured to act due to increased criticism from the media and civil society.

Given the lack of capacity at the national level to address the vast spread of fires, regional/ international assistance has been crucial. Russia received aid from European countries and the United States, particularly

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fire-fighting equipment and manpower.

However such efforts are only the tip of the iceberg, as the dried peatlands may continue to burn underground. Investments thus need to be made in irrigating the drained peatlands, thereby moistening the peat and even providing the basis of more sustainable development.

Indonesia has realized this and has engaged various international players, such as funding from Japan and the Netherlands to introduce peatland irrigation initiatives. Furthermore, it maintains regional cooperation, particularly with Malaysia and Singapore, in strengthening regional capacity.

ASEAN can thus play a significant role in Russia's current plight, by sharing its transboundary haze experiences with Russia.

Such an opportunity is not too far on the horizon, given the upcoming Second ASEAN-Russia Summit, which will take place alongside the 17th ASEAN Summit in late October 2010.

Initiatives to address peatland fires should therefore be tabled for discussion during the summit, which would indeed deepen ASEAN-Russia ties.

Missing such as opportunity would not help ASEAN's efforts of positioning itself as a significant regional player.

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