

Singapore smog casts diplomatic cloud

Haze from burning palm oil plantations in Indonesia has left the two nations at loggerheads over pollution.

Heather Tan Last Modified: 22 Jun 2013 17:42



Singapore's famous skyline is barely visible through the midday haze [Heather Tan/Al Jazeera]

Singapore, RoS - What started out as a seemingly minor worry over air pollution has taken on a dramatic twist and spiralled into escalating diplomatic tension between Singapore and Indonesia.

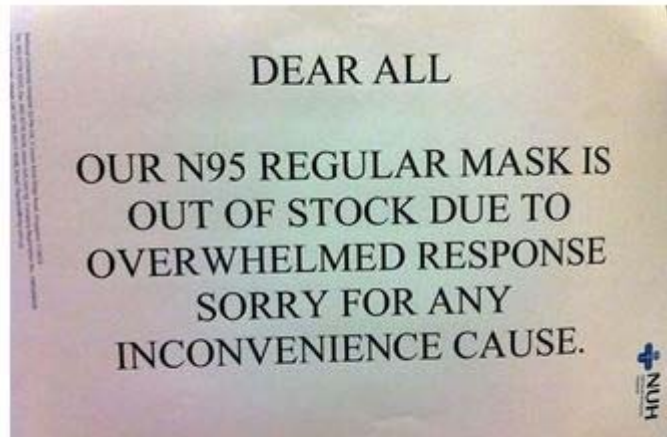
Singapore is facing its worst pollution crisis in more than a decade, after forest fires in Indonesia caused air quality in the neighbouring city - usually relatively pollutant-free - to plunge into the hazardous zone, reaching readings of up to 400 on the "Pollutant Standards Index" on Friday afternoon. According to the National Environmental Agency, air becomes "very unhealthy" when it hits the 200 mark and is "hazardous" at 300.

Indonesia has refused to apologise for the haze crisis, insisting instead its government would do everything it could to tackle the problem.

"The Singaporean government must be aware that we have done all we can to tackle this haze problem," Foreign Affairs Minister Marty Natalegawa said late on Friday. "Indonesia has been dealing with the haze for years and improvements have been made."

Haze is not a new phenomenon in Southeast Asia, but the severity of air pollution this year raised alarms among Singaporeans, prompting the government to confront its vast neighbour, the world's fourth-largest country, about its forest fires.

Singapore formed a 'ministerial haze committee' and sent officials to an emergency meeting in Jakarta on Friday. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong also got involved, reiterating that he would write to Indonesia to register "serious concerns".



A sign at the National University Hospital help show the scale of the problem [Heather Tan/Al Jazeera]

"No country or corporation has the right to pollute air at the expense of Singaporeans' health and well-being," said Environment Minister Vivian Balakrishnan, adding that this year's haze was the worst Singapore had ever faced.

Indonesia reacted, accusing Singapore of "behaving like a child" by complaining. "Singapore shouldn't be like children, in such a tizzy," said coordinating Minister Agung Laksono, who told reporters Singapore said nothing when there was fresh air but complained about "occasional haze".

Singapore Management University law professor Eugene Tan said such pollution was "a persistent problem" between the two countries, dating back to the 1990s. "The Indonesian authorities' seeming indifference to the haze will only strain bilateral relations," Tan said, adding that Singapore's hands were tied and it "remained at the mercy of Indonesia".

"Indonesia appears to have taken the view that it is doing all it can, and that it is not for neighbouring countries to say what more ought to be done."

Kishore Mahbubani, dean and professor at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, said there would always be differences and challenges in any bilateral relationship, but asserted that the overall relationship between the Southeast Asian counterparts remained positive.

"There is no doubt that Singapore is extremely unhappy with the haze which comes from Indonesia, but I don't see this as a persistent source of tension that could damage bilateral relations," he said.

Environmental emergency

"Fires across Sumatra are wreaking havoc for millions of people in the region and destroying the climate," said Bustar Maitar, head of Greenpeace's Indonesian forest campaign. The activists also blamed palm oil companies for causing fires on Sumatra island.

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Indonesia blamed eight palm oil companies for the fires and named two Singapore firms it believes had roles in contributing to the billowing smoke.

In an attempt to remedy the increasingly urgent situation, military planes and helicopters were dispatched into the skies above Riau province to put out raging fires.

Known as cloud-seeding, the technique attempts to create rain by "encouraging the condensation of water in clouds", explained scientist Simon Watts at the NUS Environmental Research Institute. "It is a way of

creating rain but it is important to understand that smoke itself contains many substances which are harmful to health," he said.

Watts noted that rain would not be "a total solution", as harmful gases and particles found in smoke from forest fires could instead end up on the ground and in reservoirs.

"While rainfall occurring through cloud-seeding techniques reduces particle concentrations in the atmosphere to some degree, it is limited to the time it is raining - so as soon as the rain stops, smoke-laden air will continue to spread, unless the rain is heavy enough to put out all burning sources," he said. "Environmentally, it is the materials used that raise concerns, and in some places, experiments for cloud seeding have been halted for precautionary reasons."

Earlier in the week, Indonesia deployed firefighters to contain the blazes and said it was educating farmers about environmentally friendlier alternatives - but fires continued to rage as the weather worsened.

The dry season sees large areas of forests being burnt to clear land and occurs annually between June and September. Dangerous levels of smoke are created during this period, and native wildlife has also been said to be severely affected, with as many as a third of the rare Sumatran orangutans being wiped out last year.

Singapore believes part of the problem stems from companies commissioning the fires, but environmental security analyst Gianna Gayle Herrera Amul told Al Jazeera that naming and shaming the guilty parties would only serve as "a blame-shifting game that could deviate from the root causes of the haze".

"The bigger picture here is a much drier climate and Indonesia's own development goals," she said, adding that putting out the fires would only matter if there was effective implementation of existing laws. "Indonesia's vision needs to reconcile with overall efforts to

address consequent environmental degradation, as assistance from regional countries to deal with the fires is only a short-term solution."

Regional suffering

Neighbouring Malaysia also bore some of the regional brunt when it closed 200 schools and banned fires in some areas, after a district in the south recorded hazardous pollution levels similar to Singapore.

Marine police warned of thick haze conditions in the Straits of Malacca and marine vessels plying the waterway refrained from navigating at night to avoid a repeat of a 1997 accident when two ships collided, throwing dozens of sailors into the sea.

In Singapore, skyscrapers and major tourist attractions disappeared from view as haze swept through the city, imprisoning citizens indoors. The military suspended outdoor training and fast food giants halted delivery services due to the worsening conditions. Public transportation was also affected, forcing train services to slow down due to poor visibility.

Life however, went on for the city's construction workers, many of them migrant labourers who continued to toil outdoors without protection, despite the horrendous air condition.

Pakistani tourist Ubaid Ghani Rathore, 39, who was in Singapore on a business trip, blamed the bad weather for his failed sightseeing plans. "I am obviously very disappointed as I was hoping to see more of Singapore - but due to this unfortunate haze, I can't see all the sights I had been planning on visiting," he said.

Boxes of disposable masks flew off pharmacy shelves, as fearful consumers rushed to buy them in an effort to protect themselves against the conditions that look set to plague the country for months. Some netizens also reported prices of masks being doubled due to high demand.

Sales executive Kitty Goh, 25, who queued up at the National University Hospital for two hours, told Al Jazeera that masks had been sold out by noon, despite staff limiting masks to three per person.

"I'll have to use my masks very carefully in this case," she said. "Who knows when we will ever see clear skies again?"