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A bad neighbor

Choking once again on what has become a yearly haze, Indonesia's neighbors could be forgiven for thinking that Jakarta could care less about other countries in the region. Cynics say the noxious haze plaguing neighboring countries and parts of this country should blow over Jakarta, to jolt our top officials into action. It sometimes helps when the decision makers feel the consequences of their inaction.

More than 600 fire "hot spots" have been burning on Sumatra and Kalimantan islands since July, yet the government seems to be doing little to remedy this problem. Much as last year it did little, or the year before and so on.

Is there any sense of urgency for what has become a yearly grief over the past 20 years? Hardly. For these 20 years we have been doing an injustice to our neighbors and to our own people, since the first big forest fires in 1982.

Singapore suffered its worst air quality readings for more than nine years over this past weekend. Malaysia was forced to declare a state of emergency at its biggest seaports, Port Klang and Kuala Selangor, in August last year. Yet the authorities in Indonesia just sit back and relax.

It has become something of a mantra for our officials, the claim that there is nothing to be done about the fires until the rainy season comes to the rescue. Then the issue goes away only to come back with a vengeance the following year.

Once the issue dies with the arrival of the rain, key proposals by experts on how to deal with the scourge are conveniently shelved and the root causes of the problem go unaddressed.

All of this is often accompanied by mudslinging, as officials here blame any and all parties for the problem, from traditional farmers to illegal loggers, handily forgetting their own role in the recurring environmental disaster.

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What is wrong with us? Who do we think we are, as a nation and a government, to cause such suffering to our neighbors and our own people? We would hate to think that because we are the biggest country in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) we believe we can do as we please.

Billions of rupiah are lost each year in health and environmental costs, and the same amount of money, perhaps more, is lost by our neighbors. These losses include disruptions to the shipping and aviation industries.

Our neighbors have been more than tolerant of Indonesia's failure to deal with this annual problem. But this tolerance should not be perceived by Jakarta as a license to ignore the issue.

We have the tools in place to deal with the haze, so why is no action being taken? There is the 1994 ban on the burning of forests and grassland for land clearance, but the regulation is not consistently enforced and very few offenders have been brought to court since the 1980s.

One of the worst years for forest fires was 1997, when almost 10 million hectares of forest in Sumatra, Kalimantan, Java, Sulawesi and Papua were destroyed, affecting the health and economy of 70 million people across Southeast Asia.

More than 13,000 hectares of forest have been destroyed so far this season, according to the government.

The country is short of funds and lacking the equipment and technology to fight the yearly forest fires, but we are not totally helpless.

Industries in remote areas of Kalimantan and Sumatra, the two islands most prone to forest fires, can contribute to the prevention of fires by setting up their own fire fighting teams. This would be in their own interests, but in case they don't see it that way local governments should make it obligatory. And farmers still engaged in slash-and-burn agriculture can be educated about the dangers of using fire to clear land.

Regionally, the 10-member ASEAN has signed the so-called ASEAN Agreement on Trans-boundary Haze Pollution. A useful device for fighting forest fires, it has been largely ignored for four years. And coincidentally, Indonesia is the only country that has not ratified the agreement.

Indonesia should immediately ratify the agreement to enable it to fight forest fire together with neighboring countries. It is a comprehensive devise that stipulates the setting up of an ASEAN center for that purpose. It is time for the government to admit it cannot deal with this scourge alone. It should be modest enough to admit this and be willing to cooperate with other countries to stop the haze.

By cooperating with ASEAN countries, the government would be implementing President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's favorite motto: "We can overcome anything by working together." It only takes political will to stop exporting the haze.

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