

## Extend S'pore laws to haze culprits

By GEH MIN and IVAN PNG For the straits times

SINCE the mid-1990s, the haze seems to have become an annual but unhappy ritual for Singaporeans. Planters in Sumatra set fires to clear their land. South-west and south winds blow the noxious particles towards Singapore.

Singapore ministers intercede with the government of Indonesia. Meanwhile, the National Environment Agency (NEA) carefully monitors wind directions and posts hourly updates of the Pollutant Standards Index.

Earlier this week, Asean environment ministers met in Bangkok. As they have many times before, they discussed the issue of haze.

The Asean Specialised Meteorological Centre reported that this year, the number of hot spots in Sumatra has reached a new high, exceeding the levels in 2006.

As usual, the ministers turned attention to the Asean Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution. Since Asean members signed the agreement in 2002, all except Indonesia have ratified it.

In principle, a multinational agreement should resolve the haze problem. For instance, in 1991, Canada and the United States signed a bilateral Air Quality Agreement, committing to reduce emissions of sulphur dioxide and nitrogen oxides. The two chemicals cause acid rain. Between 1990 and 2008, Canada had reduced sulphur dioxide emissions by 63 per cent. Over the same period, the United States reduced its emissions by 56 per cent.

So, the Asean environment ministers urged Indonesia to complete the ratification of the agreement. But, even if Indonesia did ratify the agreement, we might still have to hold our breath.

Open burning is already illegal under Indonesian law but, as Mr Sudarsono,

of the Bogor Institute of Agriculture, remarked: "(We) don't hear anything about regulations being enforced... So as long as they're never enforced, people will keep on burning the forests."

Singapore should not just wait for a change in wind direction or for the Indonesian government to rise to the occasion. There are two ways in which we could move forward.

One is to hold the perpetrators of the haze accountable. If a factory in Jurong emitted smoke or chemicals, it would violate Singapore's Environmental Pollution Control Act. And the NEA would vigorously prosecute the offender and stop the emissions.

Why should our law be any different for an Indonesian plantation? Whether the emissions come from Jurong or Jambi, the harm to our health, especially to that of children and older people, is the same. The harm to our economy - as tourists switch to other destinations and businesses choose other locations - is the same.

Singapore's laws should apply to all polluters, wherever they may be located. In the early years of the haze, the open burning was blamed on small farmers, who ostensibly lacked the resources to clear their land in a less harmful way.

Now, Asean ministers have squarely placed the blame on big business. Unlike smallholders, corporate wrongdoers should be relatively easier to identify and, with their business and financial connections to Singapore, easier to prosecute.

If necessary, the Environmental Pollution Control Act should be amended accordingly. Lest some worry that Singapore is extending the reach of its national laws, it is worth recalling an obvious precedent. In 2007, Parliament amended the Penal Code to make sex with young people in other countries a criminal offence in Singapore.

The other way forward is to engage with Indonesian people on the ground. A good example is the Harapan Rainforest Initiative. An international consortium of non-governmental organisations including BirdLife International, Burung Indonesia, and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds has secured a 100-year licence to conserve and protect 100,000ha of lowland forest in the provinces of Jambi and South Sumatra.

Singapore Airlines is a financial sponsor of the Harapan Rainforest Initiative. The initiative directly protects the forest and the wildlife from cutting and

burning. In addition, it provides local people with employment, and hence a stake in conservation.

More Singapore businesses should engage in efforts to provide meaningful economic opportunities to the people of rural Sumatra.

They and their families would be much better off (financially and physically) working on environmentally sustainable activities than clearing forests through open burning. The result could be a win-win for both Indonesia and Singapore.

Geh Min is a consultant ophthalmologist and past president of the Nature Society. Ivan Png is Lim Kim San Professor at the NUS Business School and professor of economics and information systems, National University of Singapore.

---