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Oct 24, 2006

## Going beyond the pale

**By For The Straits Times, Geh Min & Ivan Png**

SINGAPOREANS normally take a clean and green environment for granted. However, for the past few weeks, people have been following the PSI (Pollutant Standards Index) as avidly as the STI (Straits Times Index). The rising STI is good news; the rising PSI is not.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong had written to Indonesian President S.B. Yudhoyono of our disappointment over the recurring haze problem. President Yudhoyono apologised, and quickly organised a meeting of regional environment ministers. His government also pledged to ratify the Asean Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution.

More can be done, and must be done. We should not just wait for a change in wind direction or for the Indonesian government to rise to the occasion. Regional environment ministers are talking about an Asean fund to assist Indonesia with fighting the fires. But this would only be treating the symptoms, rather than the cause.

We prefer to address the problem of haze with measures that target the root causes, rather than the symptoms. As is so often said, prevention is better than cure.

Fundamentally, the fires and haze are due to a failure of governance and incentives. Our three-point proposal aims to restore good governance and correct incentives.

Many people have called for the Indonesian government to punish those responsible for the fires. Notably, Malaysia's Minister for Natural Resources and Environment Datuk Seri Azmi Khalid had implored Indonesia to 'impose the most severe penalties under their law on anyone found guilty' of causing the haze.

But should the Indonesian government bear the burden of enforcement alone? Various non-governmental organisations, including Greenpeace and the World Wildlife Fund, have implicated Indonesian, Malaysian and Singapore companies in causing the fires.

Our first point is consumer action. There is no reason why we as consumers should feed the hand that bites us. Let us direct our purchases towards those manufacturers of palm oil and paper products that are certified to comply with environmentally-sound agriculture.

Consumer action has already worked effectively in the clothing industry. Today, major clothing manufacturers all over the world adhere to reasonable conditions and wages for all their workers - whether they are employed directly or by contractors. It is time to enlist consumer action in the same way when combating the haze.

Our second point is our own government enforcement. We should vigorously investigate and prosecute any Singapore or foreign company that is directly or indirectly involved in open burning that pollutes the air in Singapore. The fact that the burning takes place in a foreign country should not matter. What matters is the very real harm caused here. If necessary, the appropriate legislation should be passed.

Our third point is to pay for environmental services. Indonesia's Forestry Minister M.S. Kaban had famously remarked that Malaysians and Singaporeans should be grateful for the oxygen produced by his country's forests. Indeed, Indonesia's 20 million hectares of tropical peatlands play a key role in global carbon storage and climate moderation.

But why are the peatlands in Riau and Kalimantan on fire? Because they are not accorded their proper value. These peatlands are being drained for logging and agriculture. The easiest way to clear them for planting is

to set them on fire.

We pay Indonesian companies for palm oil and paper products. Why don't we pay the Indonesian government for environmental contributions? A value should be set on the peatlands and other forests in line with their contribution to storing carbon and moderating the climate. With this income, the Indonesian government, at all its levels, would have incentives to maintain the peatlands rather than burn them.

Rather than give development aid to Indonesia, governments should pay Indonesia for services to the global environment. This would be a win-win situation for all: it would support (sustainable) economic development within Indonesia, and improve air quality and the climate worldwide.

Generally, we need to shift national and international accounting to a 'triple bottom line'. This triple bottom line would account for economic, social and environmental benefits and costs. It would also go a long way to correct the prevalent 'get rich first and clean up later' mentality.

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#### **ROOT CAUSE**

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