



Institute for Journalism, Media & Communication Studies, Keio University

## KEIO MEDIACOM COMMENTARY

NO. 2 - 28 December 2015

### **Haze in Southeast Asia: A Complicated Story**

Yamamoto Nobuto

#### **Haze 2015**

The year 2015 recorded the worst haze pollution in Southeast Asia. As early as June, haze had blanketed Riau, Indonesia,<sup>1</sup> and from there it spread to affect other parts of the vast archipelagic nation – especially the islands of Sumatra and Kalimantan – and the neighboring countries of Singapore, Malaysia, Brunei, Southern Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia and the Philippines. The source of the problem was land clearing by way of fire, which is considerably fast and inexpensive for many of the plantations in the area compared with other techniques.

Singapore was the second hardest hit country after Indonesia. Its leading English newspaper, *The Straits Times*, monitored the 24-hour Pollutant Standards Index (PSI) on the daily basis. On 14 September, the local government in Riau, located on the other side of Malacca Straits from Singapore, declared a haze emergency.<sup>2</sup> At 11pm of 24 September, *The Straits Times* reported, the PSI “was 226-279, moving entirely into the very unhealthy range for the first time.”<sup>3</sup> In early October, “(M)ore than 140,000 people have reported respiratory infections”<sup>4</sup> in the region.

As haze developed, the public did not just sit down and endure the worsening environmental conditions; many expressed anger. In late September a Singapore volunteer group called the Haze Elimination Action Team called to boycott the

---

<sup>1</sup> “Haze envelopes parts of Riau province in Indonesia,” *The Straits Times*, 30 June 2015. [www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/haze-envelopes-parts-of-riau-province-in-indonesia](http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/haze-envelopes-parts-of-riau-province-in-indonesia) (Accessed on 26 December 2015).

<sup>2</sup> “Riau declares emergency as haze worsens,” *The Straits Times*, 15 September 2015. [www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/riau-declares-emergency-as-haze-worsens](http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/riau-declares-emergency-as-haze-worsens) (Accessed on 26 December 2015).

<sup>3</sup> “Haze worsens: 24-hour PSI in very unhealthy range, 3-hour PSI hits 317 at 11pm,” *The Straits Times*, 24 September 2015. [www.straitstimes.com/singapore/environment/haze-conditions-may-worsen-on-thursday-24-hour-psi-may-cross-into-very](http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/environment/haze-conditions-may-worsen-on-thursday-24-hour-psi-may-cross-into-very) (Accessed on 26 December 2015).

<sup>4</sup> “Southeast Asia’s hazardous haze,” *Aljazeera*, 7 October 2015. [www.aljazeera.com/indepth/inpictures/2015/10/southeast-asia-hazardous-haze-151007061537973.html](http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/inpictures/2015/10/southeast-asia-hazardous-haze-151007061537973.html) (Accessed on 26 December 2015).

companies involved in starting fires in Indonesia.<sup>5</sup> In early October Singapore local supermarkets pulled all paper products of Asia Pulp & Paper Group, one of the companies suspected of connection with the forest fires in Indonesia, from stores.<sup>6</sup>

## **Annual Event**

The haze season in Southeast Asia usually runs from June to October. Haze has been described as “milky white in the atmosphere, while against a bright background it will become yellow or orange-red” and, even more troubling, can obscure vision and cause respiratory problem.<sup>7</sup> It is a kind of smoke pollution, annually affecting Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and partially Brunei and Thailand.

The main source of haze has been fires occurring in Sumatra and Kalimantan (Borneo) from Indonesia. Haze has become an annual event since 1991, and covers major parts of Singapore and Malaysia as well as Sumatra and Kalimantan. Haze endangers human health and from time to time local governments in the three countries have declared the state of emergency due to high haze pollution. It has also become a diplomatic issue among the three nations.

Haze pollution gets worse year by year, but 1997, 2005, 2006, 2009, 2013 and 2015 experienced especially severe haze problem. Haze is considered as a part of human security issue because of its harmful affect on human health. It is also a matter of transboundary risk for Southeast Asian nations. In order to prevent it, it is obvious that the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) would have to cooperate and work out some kind of solution.

## **Regional and International Agreements**

Haze pollution in 1997 was the first case that constituted a substantial health risk to the public in Southeast Asia. The so-called 1997 Southeast Asian haze was reportedly caused mainly by slash-and-burn farming in Sumatra and Kalimantan. This farming technique was the cheapest and easiest means to clear the lands for traditional agriculture.<sup>8</sup>

In response to the 1997 haze episode, there has been a series of meetings, plans and agreements attempting to control land and forest fires. On 23 December 1997 in Singapore, ASEAN environment ministers agreed on a Regional Haze Action Plan. It

---

<sup>5</sup> “We are coming after you: Haze group to companies burning land,” *Channel NewsAsia*, 25 September 2015. [www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/we-are-coming-after-you/2149884.html](http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/we-are-coming-after-you/2149884.html) (Accessed on 26 December 2015).

<sup>6</sup> “12 Products To Boycott Because You Are A Haze-Hating Singaporean,” *Must Share News*, 8 October 2015. [mustsharenews.com/asia-paper-products/](http://mustsharenews.com/asia-paper-products/) (Accessed on 26 December 2015).

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.cwb.gov.tw/V7e/knowledge/encyclopedia/me014.htm> (Accessed on 26 December 2015).

<sup>8</sup> Heil, A. and Goldammer, J. G. (2001) “Smoke-haze pollution: a review of the 1997 episode in Southeast Asia,” *Regional Environmental Change*, 2(1): 24-37. <http://www.fire.uni-freiburg.de/vfe/Smoke-Haze%20in%20SE%20Asia%201997.pdf> (Accessed on 26 December 2015).

planned to manage and monitor land and forest fires as well as to strengthen regional land and forest fire-fighting capability.<sup>9</sup>

Four years later, on 10 June 2002, all ASEAN nations except Indonesia signed the ASEAN Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution in Kuala Lumpur. The agreement requires all parties to “cooperate in developing and implementing measures to prevent, monitor, and mitigate transboundary haze pollution by controlling sources of land and/or forest fires, development of monitoring, assessment and early warning systems, exchange of information and technology, and the provision of mutual assistance,” and even “take legal, administrative and/or other measures to implement their obligations under the Agreement.”<sup>10</sup> It was not until September 2014 when Indonesia ratified the agreement.

Despite these international and regional agreements and arrangements, haze continues to become a problem in the region and threaten public health. In other words, the series of arrangements and efforts by ASEAN has turned out to be ineffective.

### **Capitalist Logic**

A powerful industry stands in the way of tackling the haze problem. It is the palm oil industry. In the 2010s, Indonesia and Malaysia combined have produced more than 85% of palm oil in the world.<sup>11</sup> This fact indicates a complicated situation behind the haze problem in Southeast Asia.

As mentioned-above, the slash-and-burn farming is largely to blame for haze. Most of the burning has been concentrated in the Riau province, Sumatra. The province is site of the most productive palm oil producer in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Big palm oil conglomerates own the land where the fires usually occur. They have claimed to have strict no-burning policies, and yet land clearing by way of fire continues to take place in their concessions for palm oil.<sup>12</sup>

A study published in 2014 examines the operation of palm oil companies in relation to environmental concerns. It explores the top 25 palm oil companies. Only 3 of them do not have their headquarters in Southeast Asia. According to the study, 10 out of 25 companies have met the minimum standard of transparency, while the rest did not. Among the bottom of the last 10 are Malaysian, Indonesian and Singaporean companies.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> <http://haze.asean.org/how-it-became-a-problem-in-the-region/regional-haze-action-plan/> and <http://cil.nus.edu.sg/rp/pdf/1997%20Regional%20Haze%20Action%20Plan-pdf.pdf> (Accessed on 26 December 2015).

<sup>10</sup> <http://haze.asean.org/asean-agreement-on-transboundary-haze-pollution/> (Accessed on 26 December 2015).

<sup>11</sup> “Which Country Produces the Most Palm Oil.” [www.whichcountry.co/which-country-produces-the-most-palm-oil/](http://www.whichcountry.co/which-country-produces-the-most-palm-oil/) (Accessed on 26 December 2015).

<sup>12</sup> Pye, Oliver & Bhattacharya, Jayati eds. 2013. *The Palm Oil Controversy in Southeast Asia: A Transnational Perspective*. Singapore: ISEAS Publishing.

<sup>13</sup> Butler, Rhet A. 2014. “Ranking the world's best - and worst - palm oil companies in terms of sustainability,” *Mongabay*, 20 November 2014. [news.mongabay.com/2014/11/ranking-the-worlds-best-and-worst-palm-oil-companies-in-terms-of-sustainability/](http://news.mongabay.com/2014/11/ranking-the-worlds-best-and-worst-palm-oil-companies-in-terms-of-sustainability/) (Accessed on 26 December 2015).

Palm oil conglomerates cannot work without outsiders' supports. Local politicians appear to work with and for the palm oil industry. In return, palm oil companies cultivate patronage politics in Indonesia.<sup>14</sup> Local administrative regulations have not worked the way it should be. For instance, in June 2013 the governor of the Riau province, Rusli Zainal, was arrested for corruption, and among the charges included abuse of his authority in providing forestry permit and the acceptance of bribe from a private company.<sup>15</sup>

Palm oil industry is a cash cow for local politicians.

### **No clear solution**

Even with all these problems, the production of palm oil in Sumatra and Kalimantan does not appear to slow down, but instead is escalating. The world market of palm oil demands it. Palm oil is the most widely used source of vegetable oil. It is used for pizza dough, instant noodles, ice cream, margarine, chocolate, cookies, packaged bread, lipstick, detergent, biodiesel, shampoo, and soap.<sup>16</sup>

It is clear that our daily consumption is indirectly responsible for the deforestation and fires in Southeast Asia. Therefore, any kind of international agreement to tackle haze, blaming the palm oil industry and local politicians, or boycotting certain items will not be good enough. Our life style is at the center of the haze problem.

Haze is not simply a problem confined in Southeast Asia. It is connected to our daily life. It is the matter of how the palm oil industry develops and how we consume its products. While there is no easy solution, a comprehensive one is needed.

-----

### **About the Author**

Yamamoto Nobuto is Professor of Southeast Asian Studies and International Relations, Department of Politics and currently directs the Institute for Journalism, Media & Communication Studies, Keio University, Japan.

---

<sup>14</sup> Varkkey, Helena. 2013. "Patronage politics, plantation fires and transboundary haze," *Environmental Hazards*, 12(3-4): 200-217. <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/17477891.2012.759524> (Accessed on 26 December 2015).

<sup>15</sup> "After extensive questioning, KPK detains Riau governor," *The Jakarta Post*, 15 June 2013. [www.thejakartapost.com/news/2013/06/15/after-extensive-questioning-kpk-detains-riau-governor.html](http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2013/06/15/after-extensive-questioning-kpk-detains-riau-governor.html) (Accessed on 26 December 2015).

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.worldwildlife.org/pages/which-everyday-products-contain-palm-oil> (Accessed on 26 December 2015).

Institute for Journalism, Media & Communication Studies (MEDIACOM), Keio University publishes MEDIACOM Commentary electronically.

@ Copyright is held by the author or authors of the Commentary

MEDIACOM Commentary cannot be republished, reprinted, or reproduced in any format without the permission of the author or authors.

Note: The views expressed in each paper are those of the author or authors of the paper. They do not represent the views of Institute for Journalism, Media & Communication Studies, or Keio University.

Editor of the MEDIACOM Commentary  
Professor YAMAMOTO Nobuto (2015-)

Institute for Journalism, Media & Communications Studies  
Keio University  
108-8345  
Tokyo, Minato-ku, Mita 2-15-45  
<http://www.mediacom.keio.ac.jp/english/>

## KEIO MEDIACOM Commentary

- 1 Yamamoto Nobuto, "Two Sources of Abe's Confidence" (27 December 2015)
- 2 Yamamoto Nobuto, "Haze in Southeast Asia: A Complicated Story" (28 December 2015)