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## SE Asia menaced by renewed fires in Indonesia

Concern is growing in Singapore and Malaysia that the region will again be smothered in smoke pollution from uncontrolled forest fires in Indonesia. Last year, such fires caused widespread health problems, disrupted air and sea traffic, and affected tourism in the region. Indonesian fires cannot merely be considered a "natural disaster" but the result of both an economic policy based upon the over-exploitation of natural resources and government corruption (see WRM Bulletin nr. 5).

If the fires continue to gain a strong foothold in Indonesian Kalimantan and Sumatra, then Brunei, Malaysia, Singapore, southern Thailand and the Philippines could see a repeat of the pollution that blotted out the sun for days at a time in the worst-affected areas between August and November 1997.

Indonesian officials have recently identified through satellite images more than 90 "hot spot" areas in Kalimantan. Last December Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia agreed on a joint action plan to prevent a recurrence of the smoke pollution, under which Jakarta agreed to improve its fire-fighting capabilities. Nevertheless the apparent inability of Indonesian authorities to control the fires, despite an official ban on burning and evidence that most fires are deliberately set by plantation companies to clear land, are causing increasing concern in neighbouring countries that have to bear the consequences.

A reforestation fund that was intended to help replant and protect the country's tropical forests -the second largest in the world after Brazil- was not used last year to fight the fires. According to Gerry van Klinken, editor of "Inside Indonesia", a magazine published from Melbourne, this money administered via presidential decree, has been diverted to provide cheap loans to commercial timber plantation companies, which replanted cut forests with quick-growing eucalyptus, pine or acacia trees for pulp factories.

What international press agencies tend to forget, however, is the terrible problems that local populations are facing with these fires that affect their lives, health, homes and livelihoods. Neither do they emphasize on the fact that local peoples' lands are being appropriated by huge national and transnational corporations, converting forest and agricultural land into deserts of trees for feeding pulpmills instead of people. The disappearance of forests and their biodiversity and the regional and global problems stemming from the Indonesian fires seem to be more important than the lives and livelihoods of the local people of Kalimantan, who are seldom mentioned at all.

Source: Michael Richardson, International Herald Tribune, 13/2/1998.

Comments: WRM secretariat.