

INTERNATIONAL
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Smoke from Indonesia fires worsen as air quality in Singapore plunges

The Associated Press

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JAKARTA, Indonesia Skies were darkened across three Southeast Asian nations on Saturday as smoke from illegally set brush fires in Indonesia worsened, evoking memories of haze nine years ago that caused billions of dollars of losses to the region.

Singapore's air quality deteriorated to its worst level this year, the National Environment Agency said. The Pollutants Standards Index hit 130 at 10 a.m. (0200 GMT) Saturday, the first time this year it has measured above 100, the agency said. The agency defines an index reading of and anything above 100 as unhealthy.

On parts of Indonesia's Sumatra island and Kalimantan province on Borneo, flights were canceled and motorists were forced to put their lights on in the middle of the day. Cash-strapped firefighting officials said the blazes were out of control.

"We have tried various measures but it is really difficult to stop the fires," said Marjani Achmad, the head of the forest fire prevention unit in hard-hit Jambi island.

He said many of the blazes were on peat land, with some smoldering under the surface.

The haze is also covering much of Malaysia.

On Friday, only three of Malaysia's 51 air quality monitoring stations registered clean air, with 14 in the third tier of "unhealthy."

Farmers or agricultural companies set the fires on Borneo and Sumatra island as a cheap way to clear land for plantations, mostly for palm oil, during the region's annual midyear dry season.

The worst case of smoke-induced haze in Southeast Asia occurred in 1997-98. It blanketed much of the region and was blamed for losses of nearly US\$9 billion in tourism, health and business.

Several Indonesian officials have said the only thing that will extinguish the blazes is the coming monsoon rains, which are forecast to begin falling across affected areas in the next month.



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