

**15th Meeting of the Sub-Regional Ministerial Steering Committee (MSC) on
Transboundary Haze Pollution**

17 July 2013, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Remarks by

H.E. Le Luong Minh, Secretary-General of ASEAN

Excellency Datuk Seri G. Palanivel,

*Minister of Natural Resources and the Environment, Malaysia and our gracious
host of this Meeting*

Excellency Pithaya Pookaman

*Vice Minister of Natural Resources and Environment, Thailand and chair of the
Meeting*

*Your Excellencies Ministers representing other Sub-Regional Ministerial Steering
Committee countries*

Distinguished Colleagues,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my great pleasure to participate and address this important 15th Meeting of the Sub-Regional Ministerial Steering Committee on Transboundary Haze Pollution. My sincere appreciation goes to the Government of Malaysia for bringing forward and organizing this meeting at such short notice and for the excellent arrangements made for the meeting. The high-level and broad participation by various government agencies of Member States in this meeting augurs well for the serious task before us to come up with substantive and lasting solutions to the recurring transboundary smoke haze pollution.

In the face of the recent smoke haze affecting various ASEAN countries, at their annual meeting in Brunei Darussalam from 29-30 June 2013, the Foreign Ministers of ASEAN recognised that trans-boundary haze is a recurring challenge for ASEAN and they underscored the importance of the steps taken to overcome the problem. To address this issue effectively, they reaffirmed their strong commitment to continuously strengthen national and regional capacities through concerted efforts and intensified regional and international cooperation, in particular through the establishment of effective monitoring, rapid response and fire-fighting systems to mitigate haze impacts.

The Foreign Ministers tasked their senior officials to work closely with their relevant counterparts to consolidate ASEAN's existing initiatives to combat the haze, recommend new and strengthen regional cooperation measures that can be taken to prevent the haze, and report on the progress of these efforts through the Foreign Ministers to the Leaders at the next ASEAN Summit. The Foreign Ministers therefore welcomed the convening of this 15th MSC Meeting in Malaysia.

The decision of the Foreign Ministers clearly reflects their recognition of the role of multi-agency response and coordination to solve this seemingly intractable problem. The Foreign Ministers have also placed their trust primarily on this meeting to come up with concrete and durable solutions in order to report to the ASEAN Leaders when they meet in November this year. However, I am confident that we have tried and tested solutions and effective mechanisms based on the long experience gained throughout all these years. All that is needed is to put in greater effort towards vigilance, preparedness and early mobilization of emergency response actions to mitigate fires during the dry season which starts at the community level to national and regional levels. In between the dry seasons we should continue to work on preventive and monitoring activities to

prevent or minimize fires in the first place involving the village leaders and the communities at large.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

I recall that this Ministerial Steering Committee was established in 2006 as a result of the severe haze episode that year. Ministers from the affected countries recognized that there is a need to focus on concrete-on-the ground activities and for ministers to meet frequently and at short notice as the situation demands. In accordance with this mandate, I notice the Sub-Regional Ministerial Steering Committee Ministers have met frequently and have put in place innovative solutions to address this issue.

Among those that I would like to point out are a focus on efforts by Indonesia through their Comprehensive Plan of Action in Dealing with Transboundary Haze Pollution, concentration of efforts in fire-prone areas especially in peatlands through the regional ASEAN Peatland Forest Project, bilateral activities in fire-prone areas among Malaysia and Singapore with Indonesia, law enforcement and implementation of zero-burn and controlled-burn guidelines.

The ASEAN Specialized Meteorological Center, and the Malaysian Meteorological Department are doing a commendable job in monitoring hotspots and producing the regional Fire Danger Rating System respectively. ASEAN therefore has the necessary regional legal framework and national laws including the necessary mechanisms to address land and forest fires.

Despite these preventive and monitoring activities, we have learnt from the recent severe haze episode that weather and wind conditions can surprise us all with a sudden escalation of fires and spread of smoke haze. But, as demonstrated by Indonesia's concerted effort, during the recent crisis, to mobilize its fire

brigades, army and police forces to mitigate the fires, we are capable of putting out the fires quickly. Neighboring countries have offered substantial assistance to mitigate the fires. In addition the Panel of ASEAN Experts on Fire and Haze Assessment and Coordination was on standby for deployment to the affected areas to assess the situation on the ground.

The ASEAN Secretariat, acting as the interim ASEAN Centre for Transboundary Haze Pollution Control, collected information from each Member State, consolidated it and issued the situation report on a daily basis. We were also ready to coordinate the assistance offered in accordance with the Standard Operating Procedure on Monitoring, Assessment and Joint Emergency Response, under the ASEAN Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution.

Your Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen

However, all these actions can be negated if we are not vigilant enough and are not able to control escalation of fires and spread of severe smoke haze even for a day. The situation is made worse when we, Member States, are not seen working in unison to address this issue during the critical period, nor are we able to disseminate timely and correct information to assuage the angry public. Based on the recent episode, it is very clear that we will have been able to control the fires at short notice, if only this crisis had been anticipated a bit earlier and fire-fighting resources timely mobilised.

We therefore need to work on our alert and warning systems both at the national and regional level. There may be a need to review these early warning systems and recalibrate our alert levels and a further refinement of the regional Fire Danger Rating System to provide early warning, at least a few days in advance.

Apart from the government actions, the relevant stakeholders should also play their role. We should strongly enforce large private concessions to practice zero burning and encourage small holders to practice controlled burning. In this respect, we should quickly implement the decision of the 14th MSC meeting to develop the haze monitoring system, particularly for private concessions. I recognize digitized geo-referenced concession maps are sensitive information and should be handled with care, but we need to be able to find some common ground to provide authoritative information to correct any misinformation in the public domain. The fact that private concessions realize they are being monitored will act as a strong deterrent against irresponsible behavior.

Finally, recalling the call by the ASEAN Foreign Ministers for full ratification of the Haze Agreement, I appreciate the great effort made by Indonesia to complete their parliamentary process for ratification and hope the process will be completed soon. The ASEAN Secretariat also looks forward to the full establishment of the ASEAN Coordination Center for Transboundary Haze Pollution Control which Indonesia has indicated interest to host upon ratification of the Haze Agreement.

I trust that we will have a fruitful and productive discussion today to come up with effective solutions to address the recurring transboundary smoke haze pollution in our region.

Thank you!
