

Indonesia punishes firms over deadly forest fires

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Indonesia is punishing more than 20 companies in an unprecedented move for starting deadly forest fires that killed 19 people, a government official said Tuesday.

Three companies have been shut down permanently after having their

licences revoked over their role in the blazes that choked vast expanses of southeast Asia with acrid haze and cost Indonesia \$16 billion.

It is the first time the government has revoked [company](#) licences over [forest fires](#), an annual occurrence caused by slash-and-burn land clearance.

The environment ministry also froze the operations of 14 companies and said they face closure if they do not meet the government's demands over fire prevention.

Several other companies have been given a strong warning and will be put under close supervision.

"We have sanctioned 23 companies in total, ranging from administrative sanctions to license revocation, while 33 others are still in the process, they could have their licenses revoked too if they are found guilty," environment ministry official Kemal Amas told AFP.

The ministry has been investigating 276 companies in total since the fires broke out in September.

"We need firmer law enforcement so that this catastrophe does not repeat itself, it's been going on for 18 years but nobody has learnt their lesson," Amas said.

Amas said the ministry was also working hard to restore the forests and farmland destroyed in the fires.

Activists welcomed the government's new commitment to punish firms.



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The Indonesian Forum for Environment said it was unheard of for the government to revoke licences, as many companies previously avoided facing trial.

"The minister has the courage to not only freeze the companies' operation but also chase the owners in a civil case, this is great and this must be guarded carefully," Kurniawan told AFP.

"In the past some people were named suspects, but for them to actually lose their licenses, this is the first time," he said.

More than half a million people suffered [acute respiratory infections](#) in

Indonesia because of the haze, while many in neighbouring Singapore and Malaysia also fell ill.

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