

Activists slam ASEAN roadmap to stop smog

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Forest fires in Indonesia produced acrid smog that shrouded Singapore, Malaysia and other parts of the region for weeks in 2015

Southeast Asian nations agreed to a roadmap on Thursday to combat acrid haze from Indonesian fires that cloaks vast swathes of the region every year, but the move was greeted by activists with scepticism.

Further doubts were raised about the agreement with the Indonesian environment minister skipping the one-day meeting in Kuala Lumpur attended by environment ministers from the the Association of Southeast

Asian Nations (ASEAN), a 10-member regional bloc.

Malaysia's environment minister Wan Junaidi Tuanku Jaafar said to AFP that under the roadmap ASEAN members would need to take "measures and action" to fight [forest fires](#) and prevent the use of fire to clear jungles.

"But one of the challenges is that small land owners in Indonesia are allowed to use fire to clear land and so, Indonesian authorities have to negotiate with them to stop the practise," he added.

The ambitious roadmap ultimately aims to achieve a haze-free ASEAN by 2020. However, details of the roadmap remain scant and activists were doubtful the summit will result in progress.

"Indonesia, as usual is not willing to cooperate," said prominent Malaysian environmental activist Gurmit Singh, referring to the absence of the Indonesian minister.

"The haze issue in Indonesia is fuelled by corruption amid lack of enforcement against the culprits. As usual, nothing tangible comes out of ASEAN meetings."

An Indonesian official who attended the summit said the Indonesian environment minister could not attend due to an important domestic political meeting.

The ministry in Jakarta declined comment to AFP.

Last year's haze outbreak was among the worst in memory, shrouding Malaysia, Singapore, and parts of Thailand in acrid smoke as an El Nino weather phenomenon created tinder-dry conditions.

The blazes and resulting smog forced school closures and flight cancellations in the region, with thousands falling ill with respiratory problems as pollution levels hit hazardous levels.

"Looking at the Indonesian minister's absence, it gives a clear signal that things are not going smoothly," said Andrew Sebastian, CEO and co-founder of Ecotourism and Conservation Society Malaysia.

"Indonesian forest fires are the biggest problem. We need to take clear and decisive action," he added.

Indonesian forest fires are an annual dry-season problem, started illegally to quickly and cheaply clear land for cultivation—particularly for palm oil and pulpwood.

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