

More efforts needed to 'clear the air'

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PETALING JAYA: The air pollutant index (API) in three areas in Sarawak continue to hover at very unhealthy levels even as experts call for strict policies to clamp down on open burning to prevent long-term health problems.

The areas were Kuching (236), Samarahan (202) and Sri Aman (225).

Other areas in the state, such as Sibu (190) and Sarikei (183), were categorised as having "unhealthy" API levels, as well as Johan Setia, Klang, in Peninsular Malaysia with a reading of 125.

While other areas recorded API levels of below 100, some were close to being classified as "unhealthy" - Petaling Jaya (95), Batu Muda in Kuala Lumpur (96), Nilai in Negri Sembilan (92) and Kangar in Perlis (90).

Conditions were also hazy in Sabah with Labuan recording 83 in API as at 3.30pm and Kota Kinabalu, 80.

An API reading of between 0 and 50 is good; 51 to 100 (moderate); 101 to 200 (unhealthy); 201 to 300 (very

unhealthy); and 301 and above is deemed hazardous.

Asthma Malaysia co-founder Dr Helmy Haja Mydin said prolonged exposure to polluted air would lead to health problems, especially for children and senior citizens.

He said in the short term, air pollution would lead to an increased number of cases of asthma attacks, bronchitis and even heart failure.

"I've definitely seen an increase in the cases of bronchitis and asthma attacks in my practice," said Dr Helmy, who is a respiratory physician.

There would be serious long-term health effects from breathing in polluted air, he said, adding that children and the elderly tended to be more susceptible to the risks due to their relatively weaker immune systems.

"Children breathe at a higher rate, which means they inhale more polluted air. And for them, their lungs are still developing so it may also affect their long-term lung strength," he said.

Children who were exposed to air pollution, even in the womb, were at risk of developing asthma, cough

and even lung cancer when they were older, said Dr Helmy, pointing out that haze contained fine particles - known as PM2.5 - from forest fires and, from among other sources, the combustion of motor vehicles.

According to Britain's Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs website, inhaling PM2.5 can increase age-specific mortality risk and exposure can aggravate lung and heart conditions and significantly affect the quality of life.

Dr Helmy said proper long-term policies needed to be in place to protect the air that Malaysians breathed, urging the public to keep hydrated, avoid peak traffic hours and set the car vents to recirculate.

While he advised people to minimise outdoor activities, he said this was not always practical to do so.

"So, I tell my patients to use the API readings, and their eyes - if things look bad, don't go running in the haze," he said.

Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia senior lecturer (Syariah and Law faculty) Dr Muzaffar Syah Mallow urged the government to enact a law which criminalised activities contributing to transboundary haze.

Do's and don'ts during the haze season

Do				
 Keep hydrated	 Wear face masks, such as the N95 mask	 Set "recirculate" mode in car when driving	 Wash hands and face after being outdoors	 Use saline eye drops for dry eyes
Avoid				
 Going for outdoor activities	 Peak traffic hours	 Walking near traffic hot spots (e.g. crossroads)		

Sarawak haze poser for UPSR kids



Air of uncertainty: Kuching City is shrouded in haze and air quality in the city remains at a very unhealthy level. (Above) Fishermen at the Kampung Patau-patau Dua are also being cautious going out at sea because of the current poor air quality.

Parents and students in state worried current weather may affect examinations

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KUCHING: Both parents and pupils are worried that the haze shrouding the city here may affect the smooth running of the Ujian Penilaian Sekolah Rendah (UPSR) examination, which resumes after the long weekend.

The smog is also made worse by bush fires simmering in the state, believed to be due to open burning to clear land for farming.

While many admit that they do not want the exam postponed, they feel that there may be no choice should the condition deteriorate further.

Year Six pupil Muhammad Azim Hanis Zul Azman said he hoped that the haze would go away quickly.

"Otherwise, it will be very hot in the classroom when I'm answering UPSR questions," he said, adding that he did not want the exam to be postponed as this would disrupt his holiday plans.

Year Six pupils are set to sit for their Mathematics papers once the UPSR resumes tomorrow.

Parent Grace Yong said she felt



Not good for health: A river boat driver and two tourists are wearing face masks as the State Legislative Assembly complex in Kuching is shrouded in haze.

that the exam could still proceed should the hazy conditions not deteriorate any further, adding that the necessary preparations had already been made.

"But I'm quite worried if it gets worse. Then, it is a different story," said the 40-year-old lawyer.

In Pasir Gudang, Education Minister Dr Maslee Malik said his ministry would be closely monitoring the haze situation in Sarawak,

especially the health issues involving pupils currently sitting for UPSR.

"The Sarawak Education Department will take the necessary steps based on the current standard operating procedures," he said, adding that any decision made by the ministry would be based on the department's report.

Maslee was talking to reporters after attending the Merdeka Special Charity Run at Pasir Gudang

Xtreme Park yesterday.

It was earlier reported that the head of Sarawak State Disaster Management Committee secretariat, Major Ismail Mahedin from Sarawak Civil Defence Force, had said that the UPSR would go on despite the haze.

"If the Air Pollutant Index (API) readings exceed 201, schools will be closed but the UPSR examination will go on as scheduled under strict supervision by the school and exam invigilators," he said on Saturday.

He, however, said that UPSR candidates in Kuching, Samarahan, Serian and Sri Aman would be provided with face masks when they sit for their Mathematics and Science papers.

A total of 40,448 pupils are sitting for the UPSR in the state, with the Mathematics and Science papers scheduled for Sept 10 to 12.

Even as transboundary haze continues to affect Sarawak, firefighters in the state are battling local fires which are contributing to the unhealthy air quality.

Five new wildfire cases were reported yesterday, bringing the total number since Sept 1 to 124.

Fire and Rescue Department assistant director Tiong Ling Hii said its personnel were still carrying out operations in eight locations.

He said some of the fires, including those in Jalan Camar and Kampung Pinnan Jaya here, were believed to have been caused by open burning activities by farmers to clear land.

"There are still some irresponsible individuals although we have advised the public to stop all open burning activities."

"In the current hot and dry conditions, the fire from open burning will spread quickly."

"The API in Kuching is already at a very unhealthy level. The smoke from open burning will make the situation worse," he said.

Tiong said once the fire had spread to a large area, it would take more two days to put it out.

"We hope the public will understand the situation and heed our advice," he said.

Watch the video
thestartv.com

