



Sri Aman in Sarawak recorded an Air Pollutant Index reading of 170 at 7am yesterday. PIC BY MOHD ROJI KAWI

Air quality improves in Sri Aman

KUCHING: Residents in Sri Aman are able to breathe a little easier as air quality in the district has improved.

The district recorded the worst air quality in the country when its Air Pollutant Index reading shot up to a hazardous level of 407 on Friday.

Sri Aman's API reading was 108 yesterday.

Sarawak Fire and Rescue Department assistant operations director Tiong Ling Hii said a two-hour downpour on Friday evening helped to douse peat soil fires.

However, he said, underground peat soil fires were affecting 40ha at Kampung STC in Sri Aman.

He said the department and the Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency (MMEA) would use a Bombardier aircraft to drop water bombs.

"Six excavators will be deployed for a fire break, where we will plough the land to create a boundary (ditch) and prevent the spread of forest fires."

The state Disaster Relief Management Committee yesterday said two hotspots were detected

in Sarawak, one in Brunei, 544 in Kalimantan and 209 in Sumatra.

Another round of cloud seeding was conducted in Sarawak yesterday with the help of the Royal Malaysian Air Force's Charlie 130 Hercules to improve the air quality.

In Kuala Lumpur, Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail said 60 per cent of fires on 81ha of plantation land and forest area in Sri Aman were put out on Friday.

A Bernama report quoted her as saying that the Fire and Rescue Department, Civil Defence Force and MMEA, with the cooperation of other agencies, were working hard to put out fires in the remaining 32ha of land.

She said the operation was in its sixth day yesterday.

The National Disaster Management Agency, she said, would continue to monitor efforts to tackle the haze in the affected states.

"On Friday, the Malaysian Meteorological Department and the air force carried out cloud-seeding operations in

west Sarawak.

"It resulted in rain in Kuching, Samarahan, Sri Aman, Betong, Saratok and Sarikei," she said after handing out 1,200 N95 face masks courtesy of the Pandan Service Centre, at Taman Nirwana Muhibah Complex here yesterday.

In Shah Alam, the Selangor Health Department recorded an increase in the number of haze-related illnesses.

Its director, Datuk Dr Khalid Ibrahim, said the number of asthma cases in the state had increased by 25 per cent.

The number of people with conjunctivitis, he said, had increased by three per cent.

"The increase in the number of cases is not significant since many people in the state follow the Health Ministry's advice on how to protect themselves from the haze."

In George Town, the haze led to a drop in the number of visitors to one of the state's iconic attractions, Penang Hill.

Penang Hill Corporation general manager Datuk Cheok Lay Leng said there was a drop in the



Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail helping a child put on a face mask in Kuala Lumpur yesterday. BERNAMA PIC

number of visitors during the off-peak season, which normally saw between 2,000 and 3,000 visitors daily.

"On Wednesday, when API readings reached the very unhealthy level in Penang, we received only 1,800 visitors, compared with 2,900 visitors on Tuesday."

On Wednesday, Penang experienced the worst haze situation ever with very unhealthy API readings of 234 in Minden and 263 in Balik Pulau.

Checks by the *New Sunday Times* showed many people in the state taking advantage of the improved air quality by going out, and visiting the George Town Heritage enclave and Penang Botanical Garden.

The Department of Environment said apart from Sri Aman, 17 stations in the country registered unhealthy API readings of between 102 and 160.

Forty-nine stations recorded moderate API readings of between 54 and 97.