

# REGIONAL AFFAIRS

## Asia

### Agreement on Forest Fire Haze


On 10 June 2002, environment ministers signed the *Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution*, which was drafted with the assistance of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP).

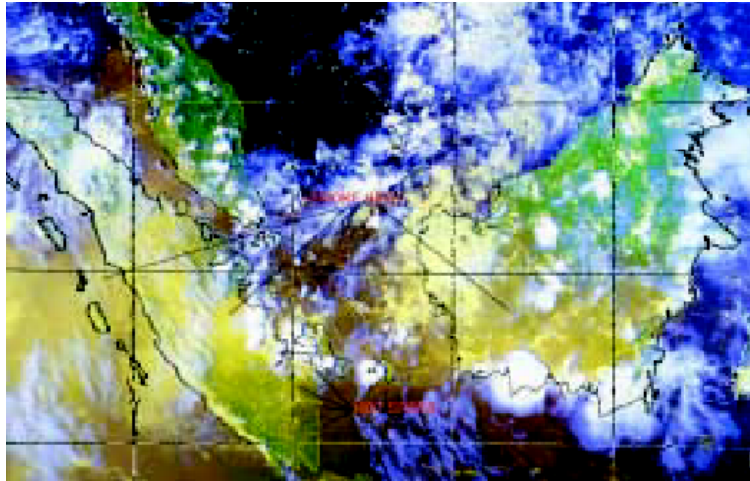
The Agreement is designed to prevent a repeat of the suffocating smog caused by forest fires that plagued the region in 1997 and 1998. It addresses policy and technical

matters relating to monitoring, preventing and mitigating smoke from forest fires, and follows four rounds of negotiations arranged by the ASEAN Secretariat.

The 1997-98 fires started mainly on oil palm plantations and agricultural and forestry holdings of the Indonesian islands of Sumatra and Kalimantan, and were fanned by hot, dry conditions caused by the El Niño weather phenomenon. About 10 million hectares of Indonesia's na-

tional forests, one of the world's most important centres of biodiversity, were destroyed, while more than 20 million people were exposed to extremely high levels of pollutants known to cause both acute and long-term health effects. Airports in Singapore and neighbouring countries were closed because of thick smog. UNEP said total economic losses from the fires were estimated at around \$9.3 billion.

UNEP Executive Director Klaus Töpfer said that he welcomed 'the strong stand taken by governments to prosecute, or rescind the licences of, logging and plantation companies on whose property illegal fires are detected.' He added that the legal framework provided another layer of resolve and preparedness against future forest fire episodes. (MJ) 



Source:  
Meteorological Service of Singapore 2002

Satellite image shows extensive smoke haze over Indonesia and neighbouring areas on 20 October 1997. Hot spots are probable areas of forest fires. Smoke haze had severe effects on the health of people over a wide area of Southeast Asia

Courtesy: GEO 3