

Thailand, Burma and Laos in tri-nation haze battle plan

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By: THE BANGKOK POST

Thailand will cooperate with Burma and Laos in a campaign against forest fires in Thailand's north later this month as the three countries brace for the approaching summer haze.

"We cannot carry out prevention alone," 3rd Army chief Wijak Siribansop said, stressing the need for a joint operation to prevent the transboundary pollution that has caused grave concern among residents who are at risk of breathing tiny dust particles from the haze into their lungs.

This problem can be prevented because it's 99 percent manmade, Wijak said. In his view, residents in affected areas in the three countries are the key to success because their help is essential in preventing fires.

"Locals know all about the fire or haze problems because most of it is caused by people," Wijak said.

If authorities educate them about the danger and talk them into avoiding causing fires, the problem will ease, he said.

Haze has been a serious problem in Thailand's northern provinces during the dry season between February and April as farmers set fires to clear land for crop cultivation.

This can increase the risk, as the flames can spread to nearby forests, resulting in a huge amount of haze that can, in many cases, cover certain areas densely.

What is most dangerous is particulate matter, or PM10, tiny dust with a diameter of 10 micrometres or less (about one seventh the width of a human hair). It can easily lodge in the lungs when breathed in, causing severe respiratory problems.

In late February and March last year, PM10 levels rose beyond the prescribed safety limit. A record was set in Mae Hong Son's Muang district, which reported a level of 177 microgrammes per cubic metre, against the limit of 120.

However, Wijak said he is satisfied with the efforts to curb the haze last year as Thai authorities have reduced brush fires and haze by nearly 40 percent.

This year the government plans a further 20 percent reduction.

"That is quite a high target," the 3rd Army chief admitted. "But we're trying to get to that point."

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