Indonesia's rhetoric over wildfire haze tests regional cooperation

By Resty Woro Yuniarin, in Jakarta, *South China Morning Post*, Oct 13, 2026

The claim by an official of the Indonesia government that his country exports "oxygen" and not just smoke to its neighbours has renewed criticism of Jakarta's handling of its annual forest fires, with analysts warning that defensive nationalism risks undermining regional cooperation to tackle the **recurring haze crisis**.

The remarks by Syahganda Nainggolan, the newly appointed head of the Government Communication Agency, reignited criticism over Indonesia's handling of its ongoing forest and peatland fires, which have sent thick haze to Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei and parts of the Philippines. Indonesia shares the island of Borneo with Malaysia and Brunei, holding 73% of the island's land mass.

"We ask all our neighbours to understand that this is beyond human error, this is truly [caused by] nature," Syahganda said on October 10, as quoted by local news outlet *Kompas*. "We're not just sending smoke. If there's no smoke, we're sending oxygen. Singapore and Malaysia's oxygen comes from our forests."

Buildings in Singapore are seen on October 13 shrouded by haze from forest fires in neighbouring Indonesia (photo by Reuters)

This year's fires have been exacerbated by slash-and-burn practices to clear land for plantations, alongside extreme drought attributed to a super El Nino. As of September 29, Indonesian police had arrested 196 suspects in connection with forest and land fires across the country.

Syahganda's comments triggered sarcasm and disbelief among social media users in Malaysia and Singapore. They echoed a similarly controversial statement made by then vice-president Jusuf Kalla during the 2015 haze crisis when he claimed Indonesia sent "clean air" to Singapore and Malaysia for 11 months of the year "without being thanked".

'Concerning' rhetoric

The government's dismissive narrative has also drawn criticism from foreign policy analysts, who argue that Jakarta should acknowledge its shortcomings and welcome assistance to extinguish the fires.

"In my opinion, this statement reflects poorly on Indonesian diplomacy. It's not only defensive, but also unempathetic and lacking in international etiquette," said Shofwan Al Banna Choiruzzad, an associate professor of international relations at the University of Indonesia. He also warned that it would negatively affect the reputation of the country's president Prabowo Subianto's and make him a "common enemy" of Indonesia's neighbours.

Malaysia's Petronas Twin Towers and commercial buildings are seen shrouded by haze in Kuala Lumpur on October 13 (photo by AFP)

Melinda Martinus, a fellow at the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute's Asean Studies Centre in Singapore, said the communications chief's comments were "concerning because they risk

framing a recurring environmental and public-health crisis as a natural phenomenon rather than a problem that also involves governance, land management and accountability".

"The concern is that such rhetoric can undermine the diplomatic goodwill needed to manage a transboundary crisis" and make it more difficult to advocate for regional cooperation through institutions such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, Martinus added.

Dafri Agussalim, a professor of international relations at Gadjah Mada University, called Syahganda's remarks "inappropriate" and a form of "narrow nationalism". He urges Jakarta to "sit together" with its neighbours affected by the haze to coordinate responses and assistance, under the framework of ASEAN's 2002 Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution.

Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim called Prabowo last week to voice his concern over the fires and offer help. "The haze situation is indeed worrying. I have personally contacted President Prabowo and he agreed to take the necessary steps," Anwar said on October 13.

Malaysia's foreign and environment ministers have contacted their Indonesian counterparts to "coordinate efforts to tackle forest and land fires and the resulting haze", Anwar said, adding the he had also instructed his foreign minister Mohamad Hasan to engage the environment chiefs of ASEAN member countries.

However, Deputy Prime Minister Ahmad Zahid Hamidi told the *New Straits Times* on October 11 that "there has been no response so far" to Malaysia's outreach from Indonesia. "We are taking a positive view," he said. "Perhaps they do not require our assistance." The day before, Indonesia's foreign minister Arrmanatha Nasir said he had explained to Hasan the country's firefighting efforts, such as "deploying more than 60,000 personnel and 48 helicopters and aircraft for water bombing and weather modification".

Shared responsibility

On October 12, Prabowo ordered the deployment of 70,000 forest rangers to combat forest and peatland fires in Sumatra and Kalimantan, which he said was "a top government priority". Prabowo also called for stronger grass-roots measures to prevent similar cases from recurring. "We must step in to combat and prevent the fire in the most massive way possible," he said during a cabinet meeting that day.

As of October 12, fires have affected 129,899 hectares (320,987 acres) of peatland, of which 129,260 hectares had been extinguished, data from the National Disaster Mitigation Agency (BNPB) showed.

The firefighting measures are focused on six provinces on Borneo, namely Riau, South Sumatra, Jambi, West Kalimantan, Central Kalimantan and South Kalimantan. BNPB head Suharyanto said on October 12 that the fires in Central and South Kalimantan provinces were in "remote areas", making it difficult for the task force to reach affected locations.

Shofwan, the international-relations professor, also urged Indonesia to work with Singapore and Malaysia to jointly take action against plantation companies and financial firms involved in concessions where the fires occurred. Recent findings by environmental groups Greenpeace

Indonesia, Greenpeace Malaysia and Pantau Gambut showed that among the 20 concessions emitting the most haze, “at least four” were linked to business groups based in Singapore, while one was tied to a Malaysian plantation group.

Martinus said the 2002 ASEAN agreement on haze provided a regional framework for prevention, monitoring and cooperation, but not the enforcement authority to compel companies to pay compensation. “ASEAN can strengthen cooperation on documenting evidence and enforcement,” she said. “This could involve more systematic sharing of hotspot data, concession maps, corporate ownership information and investigation findings, subject to applicable laws and evidentiary requirements.”