Forest fires blanket several Indonesian provinces, causing surge in people falling ill

Linda Yulisman

Members of an Indonesian joint task force extinguishing a fire at a peatland in Pekanbaru, Riau province, on July 31, 2023. PHOTO: AFP

JAKARTA - Several provinces in Sumatra and Kalimantan have been blanketed with haze from raging forest fires that worsened in August, causing a surge in people with respiratory ailments such as sore throat and shortness of breath.

The Indonesian authorities are deploying ground patrols, water bombing and cloud seeding to stem fires in forests with large areas of peatland, Dr Abdul Muhari, a spokesman for the National Disaster Management Agency (BNPB), told The Straits Times.

The six provinces that are prone to forest fires and are deeply affected by the haze are Jambi, Riau and South Sumatra in Sumatra, and West Kalimantan, Central Kalimantan and South Kalimantan in Kalimantan, the Indonesian part of Borneo.

These provinces also had massive fires in 2015 and 2019 due to the prolonged dry seasons, which spread the haze to neighbouring countries including Singapore and Malaysia, affecting their air quality.

On Sunday, Singapore's National Environment Agency warned that dry weather in Sumatra this week could result in hazy conditions in the Republic, adding that it was monitoring the situation closely.

Peatlands are highly flammable, and the fires are harder to extinguish as they can keep burning underground for weeks, especially in deep areas, producing a thick, choking smog.

The ongoing El Nino weather phenomenon has also brought dry weather and delayed the rainy season in several regions.

In South Sumatra's capital Palembang, pulmonologist Dini Rizkie has tended to more patients with respiratory tract infections and others affected by the haze at two hospitals since late August.

While most of them showed mild-to-moderate symptoms, a few with severe symptoms had to be hospitalised to get adequate treatment.

"There has been around a 20 per cent increase in the number of patients with respiratory diseases since the fires and smoke intensified," Dr Dini told ST. "The air quality has been very unhealthy."

The South Sumatra health agency reported an increase of 4,000 cases of respiratory ailments in August, from July.

In South Kalimantan, more than 189,000 residents have had respiratory ailments, officials said.

Earlier this week, the Jambi provincial administration advised residents to wear masks while doing outdoor activities. It is also considering closing schools if the air quality worsens.