

PRESS RELEASE

Kuala Lumpur, 11 June 2002: ASEAN Ministers responsible for environment met today and resolved to continue their efforts to tackle comprehensively, and on a concerted and collaborative basis, the transboundary haze pollution problem that has plagued ASEAN periodically in recent years. The Ministers agreed to work towards ratifying the ASEAN Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution signed yesterday as soon as possible, to ensure that regional efforts are further enhanced through the legal mechanisms provided for in the agreement. The agreement requires at least 6 ratifications to enter into force.

2. Pending the establishment of the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Transboundary Haze Pollution Control provided for in the agreement, the Ministers agreed on a set of interim arrangements using existing institutions and resources. The Ministers also agreed to conduct cross-border fire and haze disaster simulation exercises among some member countries to test regional preparedness for coordination, communication, and disaster relief, which are the key elements of the agreement.

3. The Ministers noted the likelihood of a weak to moderate El Niño evolving gradually in the next six to nine months. While the chances of a recurrence of the severe smoke haze of 1997/1998 are

small, increased occurrence of slight to moderate haze can be expected within the affected countries during the dry season between July and October, 2002. The Ministers, therefore, resolved, during the dry period, to (i) intensify early warning efforts and surveillance programmes, (ii) consider banning open burning in plantation and forest areas, and (iii) have strict enforcement of controlled burning for small-scale farmers and local community, including regulating the timing for burning.

4. The Ministers expressed their satisfaction over the regional activities undertaken so far. These include timely and more accurate weather forecasts and early warning measures; strict enforcement of existing laws and enactment of new laws to regulate open burning; training of prosecution and law enforcement officers; dialogue sessions with traditional communities, NGOs, plantation companies and other stakeholders; development of preventive tools such as GIS database, fire danger rating systems and practical guidelines for implementing zero burning and controlled burning policy; information management through the *ASEAN Haze Action On-line* website; development of fire suppression mobilization plans for the region's fire-prone areas; and a pilot project to develop community-based model and approaches in fire management. The Ministers expressed appreciation to Indonesia for successfully prosecuting those engaged in open burning.

5. In addition to the subregional firefighting arrangements for Sumatra and Borneo, the Ministers agreed to establish similar arrangements in other areas of ASEAN.

6. The Ministers expressed their appreciation to international organizations and donor agencies for their support to ASEAN in the prevention, monitoring and mitigation of land and forest fires. The Ministers noted that the first World Conference on Land and Forest Fire Hazards being held concurrently aims to invigorate international commitment and support, by reviewing global perspectives, and to set in place more effective national and regional strategies in addressing land and forest fires and the resulting transboundary haze pollution.

7. The Ministers emphasized that land and forest fires are worldwide phenomena with increasing incidence not only in developing countries but also in developed countries. The national, regional and global impacts due to biodiversity loss and emissions of greenhouse gases are enormous. The Ministers reiterated their call to the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) to accord special consideration to this complex issue. The Ministers urged the WSSD to demonstrate strong political commitment and agree on concrete targeted measures to tackle this problem on a sustained basis.

8. The Ministers reiterated their call to the Global Environment Facility (GEF) to continue supporting ASEAN regional efforts in

addressing transboundary haze pollution through a full-sized regional programme, particularly in the context of implementing the provisions of the ASEAN Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution.