Indonesia must manage environment better: Don

Local authorities lack commitment to good forestry practices: Expert

By KEITH LIN

INDONESIA must first overhaul the way it manages and monitors its environment and natural resources if the haze problem is to be resolved.

This was one of the main findings of a recent study on the problem conducted by National University of Singapore law lecturer Alan Tan.

According to Professor Tan, who has spent the last decade researching Indonesia’s forest fires, the country’s poor environmental governance poses a major stumbling block to a regional solution.

This is even if Indonesia ratifies the Asean anti-haze treaty, which calls for member states to act to prevent and control the burning that can pollute neighbouring countries, in the near future.

Said Prof Tan: “Without fundamental reforms within the Indonesian forestry sector, prospects for Indonesian compliance with the agreement remain bleak.”

With environmental governance decentralised since the downfall of the Suharto regime in late 90s, many of the country’s provincial and regional authorities have been reluctant to develop good forestry practices on their own, he said.

This has resulted in a huge majority of recalcitrant slash-and-burn farmers and plantation companies getting away scot-free.

Out of the 176 companies publicly identified as violators during the last protracted period of haze in 1997-98, only five were brought to court. Only one was found guilty.

“In all these cases, the government’s severe lack of monitoring capabilities led to problems with obtaining adequate evidence,” Prof Tan said.

Corruption remains a huge problem. Government officials remain more concerned with exploiting natural resources and generating revenue, and often collude with private interests, he noted.

Prof Tan said the Asean haze pact lacks teeth. For example, it does not provide for sanctions against countries that fail to fulfil their obligations.

To solve the problem, a concerted effort to raise political will has to come from within Indonesia.

This would entail tightening the country’s forestry laws to pinpoint the individual government agencies dealing with specific violations.

Prof Tan also suggested boosting incentives for local authorities to crack down on illegal logging and forest burning, such as allowing them to collect fines.

To overcome the problem of lack of evidence in courts, he suggested that laws be amended to shift the onus of disproving satellite evidence showing illegal burnings onto plantation owners. The onus of proof now rests on the prosecution.

In the longer term, Prof Tan said, the Indonesian central government must come up with sustainable policies and funding to improve land use and management of natural resources, such as getting local communities involved in fire prevention.

“It is only with the commitment to begin such difficult reforms that Indonesia can begin to shake off the terrible malaise that has long afflicted the governance of its rich natural resources,” he said.

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