

Cooperation is key to tackling haze issue



File Photo: The Star

Sunday, March 2, 2014 - 03:39
Grace Chua
The Straits Times

SINGAPORE - To solve the haze problem, countries need to cooperate and not blame each other for pollution; they should also view the problem in terms of economic inter-dependence, said legal experts at a conference on transboundary pollution on Thursday.

Singapore Institute of International Affairs chairman Simon Tay suggested four key elements for a transboundary pollution agreement that works: agreed-on standards and monitoring of pollution, deeper scientific understanding of the harms from pollution, regional institutions, as well as domestic constituencies that speak out against pollution.

These are absent from the ASEAN agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution, signed in 2002 as a regional effort to tackle haze.

For example, while the effects of long-term exposure to air pollution are known, the effects of seasonal haze that lingers for days or weeks should also be studied.

University of Oslo environmental law emeritus professor Hans Christian Bugge said a successful pact required setting common goals and a long-term commitment from parties.

And, Professor Tay said, countries are connected by trade and finance flows. So agriculture firms, traders and banks have a role to play in supply chain management too, to prevent the illegal burning that causes haze.

"It has to be a private sector, national and international or regional effort," he said.

The two-day conference at Orchard Hotel, convened by the Centre for International Law at the National University of Singapore, was held to discuss states' rights and responsibilities under international law and explore mechanisms of cooperation and problem-solving, said Professor Tommy Koh, chairman of the centre's governing board.

Some 100 academics and officials attended the conference, which was chaired in part by Prof Koh and Professor S. Jayakumar, chairman of the centre's international advisory panel.

Speaking to the media on the sidelines, Professor Alan Tan of the NUS law school highlighted a limitation of international litigation: States cannot haul each other to court against their will. Both must agree to settle a dispute in the international arena.

But agreements, like the one by ASEAN on the haze, have limits. For one thing, Indonesia has not ratified it and is unlikely to do so before its election.

And US\$500,000 (S\$632,000) or so worth of funding pledged by member states as a result "is a joke", compared to the size of the haze problem, said environmental law lecturer Laode Syarif of Hasanuddin University in Sulawesi.

Ultimately, Prof Tan said, "cooperation and unilateral action must go hand in hand. Cooperation is going to be the long-term solution."

caiwj@sph.com.sg

THE STRAITS TIMES

Get a copy of *The Straits Times* or go to straitstimes.com for more stories.