

Asean must act decisively to end recurring haze, says MMA

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October 17, 2026 @ 12:30pm



The sun rises as haze shrouds vessels anchored in the eastern waters of Singapore as smoke from regional wildfires reduces visibility across the island city-state in Singapore on Oct 16. REUTERS PIC

KUALA LUMPUR: The Malaysian Medical Association (MMA) has called for concrete, collective action by Asean member states, including Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore and Brunei, to tackle transboundary haze that continues to threaten millions of people across the region.

Its president, Dr L. Sivanesan, said countries must enforce the Asean Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution by setting clear

implementation deadlines, ensuring compliance and publicly reporting progress.

"Regional agreements must deliver results rather than remain promises on paper," he said in a statement today.

Sivanesan said authorities should also investigate and prosecute those responsible for illegal burning, including companies linked to Malaysia.

"Penalties must be imposed to deter repeat offences, while concession maps and fire hotspot data should be made publicly accessible," he said.

He said haze should also be treated as a public health emergency, with authorities activating emergency health response plans, monitoring haze-related illnesses and ensuring healthcare facilities had sufficient staff, medicines and equipment.

Vulnerable communities should be protected through appropriate respiratory protection, including free face masks for those who can use them safely and clean-air shelters in badly affected areas, with priority given to high-risk groups.

Sivanesan also called for consistent school closure procedures based on air quality levels, alongside support for students from low-income families during home-based learning.

He said authorities must prevent fires through investment in peatland restoration, fire

prevention measures, early warning systems and sustainable alternatives to slash-and-burn practices.

"These preventive efforts must be carried out throughout the year," he said.

Doctors could treat the health effects of haze, but tackling its root causes required firm action and sustained commitment from governments across the region, he added.

Sivanesan said Southeast Asians should not have to accept toxic air as a recurring annual problem after more than two decades of haze episodes.

"Clean air is a basic right, not a privilege. After more than two decades of recurring haze, people deserve tangible results," he said.

The Asean Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution was signed in 2002, committing member states to work together to prevent, monitor and fight fires.