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Thailand's Haze Crisis

For several weeks now, the Northern provinces of Thailand have been choking from air pollution caused by haze and small particulate matter known as PM 2.5. With the Air Quality Index (AQI) measurements in Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai regularly reaching hazardous levels, the air pollution is posing a serious health threat to the locals, particularly children, the elderly, and those with respiratory problems.

To understand this matter more clearly, the Foreign Correspondent's Club of Thailand hosted a panel discussion on the topic of "Is 'Dirty Air' the new normal for once tourist-friendly Thailand?" earlier this month. Joined by researchers and professionals from pollution and environmental fields, the panel presented analysis and research on Thailand's ongoing dirty air crisis and the causing factors, as well as offering insights into possible solutions, including the government policies and reforms needed to clean Thailand's air. As pointed out during the discussion, the haze crisis is not a new normal for Thailand, nor even for Southeast Asia as a whole. Worse than that, the haze problem that the region has been dealing with collectively for a number of decades is clearly a transboundary issue.

The ASEAN region was finally driven to take action after it experienced a major haze crisis in 2015 when forest fires in Kalimantan and Sumatra in Indonesia resulted in smoke blanketing the skies over Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines. With 19 confirmed casualties and more than half a million reported to be suffering respiratory illness from the incident, the ASEAN region put its collective efforts into launching the Roadmap on ASEAN Cooperation towards Transboundary Haze Pollution Control the following year with the aim of achieving a Haze-Free ASEAN by 2020.

Despite these efforts, Thailand has suffered heavily from dirty air this year, with Bangkok and Chiang Mai particularly affected by the haze crisis. On 13 March 2019, Chiang Mai's AQI score was listed by Air Visual, an app that monitors air quality, as "the worst in the world." Due to this, campaigners and health advocates are now calling for a revision of the country's official safety standard as Thailand considers 50 micrograms per cubic meter ($\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$)

a day and a $25 \mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ annual mean to be safe, while the World Health Organization considers respective levels of $25 \mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ and $10 \mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ to be safe. As of 2018, Samut Sakhon was the most polluted city of Thailand with an annual average PM 2.5 measurement of $39.8 \mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ making it the 223rd most polluted city worldwide and the 3rd worst in ASEAN after Jakarta and Hanoi, according to the 2018 World Air Quality Report.

To address the rising issues of air quality in Thailand, the Pollution Control Department (PCD) has launched a 20-year master plan for Air Quality Management (2018-2037). The framework has adopted preventive protocols balancing economic, social, and environmental concerns, while elevating the standards of exhaust emissions for new vehicles. For Northern provinces, the Ministry of Interior has announced management measures under the mechanism of the Public Disaster Prevention and Mitigation Act, B.E. 2550, which empower provincial governors with a single command method.

Despite the current plan and regulations, panelists at the FCCT event suggested the need for a more specific and solid measure to be implemented. Dr. Siwatt Pongpiachan, Director of the Center for Research & Development of Disaster Prevention & Management at NIDA, recommended that apart from its Disaster Prevention and Mitigation Act, Thailand needs specific law comparable to the Clean Air Act in the UK and the US. He further mentioned that Thailand is falling behind its neighboring partners like Singapore and the Philippines where new legislation for air pollution has already been put in place. For ASEAN, although all member states have now agreed on the ASEAN Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution after Indonesia's ratification in 2014, the efficiency of this agreement is often questioned. Commenting on ASEAN's efforts to tackle the haze problem, Ms. Kakuko Nagatani-Yoshida, Regional Coordinator for Chemicals, Waste and Air Quality at the United Nations Environment, stated that the 10 nations have to come together and join their "political will" to solve this transboundary issue collectively. Underlining the urgency that is required, she concluded the discussion by saying, "Action on this pressing issue is needed now and we [ASEAN] cannot give it up."

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