

Waiting for the Rain

By Luo Chen Jun October 28, 2026

Luo Chen Jun is a Partnerships Manager at Common Purpose Asia Pacific in Singapore and a member of the British Council's UK–Singapore Alumni Advisory Council, a delegate at the ASEAN–Australia Track 1.5 Dialogue at the ASEAN Secretariat in Jakarta in June 2026, and at the 4th India–ASEAN Youth Conference 2026.

In 2015, I took my first part-time job at a gym. You would think a gym would do well in a haze, since runners and weekend footballers have nowhere else to go. Instead, they went nowhere. The haze kept people at home and our gym emptied along with the parks. It was my first lesson in haze economics: nobody wins, not even the businesses that should.

Eleven years later, the class is back in session. Fires in Sumatra and Kalimantan have repeatedly pushed air quality in Singapore and Malaysia into unhealthy territory since 4 September. ASEAN's meteorological center has raised its alert level to the highest for the southern region, and schools have closed in four countries. Indonesians are paying the heaviest price, with more than 170,000 treated for acute respiratory infections in August and September alone. Fighting the fires has turned deadly, too: on Oct. 15, two park officers and two security guards were killed fighting a blaze in a national park in East Java.

As a Singaporean, I grew up watching a Causeway relationship that runs on equal parts cooperation and squabbling. Haze is one of the rare topics that seats Singapore and Malaysia on the same side of the table. The two capitals have co-signed the complaint letter. They just differ on how to post it.

Singapore, true to form, reached for the rulebook. On Oct. 16, the National Environment Agency issued Preventive Measure Notices under the Transboundary Haze Pollution Act to seven companies holding concessions in Indonesia, ordering them to extinguish their fires. Malaysia chose the softer touch. Its foreign minister has ruled out legal action and instead explored alternative diplomatic routes and ASEAN mechanisms.

Both approaches bear credit. Notices create a paper trail; restraint keeps Jakarta at the table. But a paper trail isn't a fire extinguisher, and a seat at the table isn't a commitment.

Malaysia's main proposal deserves a closer look. Kuala Lumpur wants ASEAN foreign ministers to bring haze under the bloc's natural-disasters framework ahead of next month's summit in Manila. It makes sense. ASEAN has mechanisms for floods and volcanic eruptions, but none for the smoke that returns most dry seasons. A disaster label could unlock faster, pre-agreed help.

The catch is in the label. Indonesian officials have described the crisis as largely natural. A classification meant to speed up help could end up rubber-stamping that view. Floods and earthquakes are Mother Nature's doing. These fires, for the most part, come with a company brand.

Haze is not weather. Weather sets the stage: a long dry season, made worse this year by El Niño, leaves the land parched. But humans supply the fuel. Humans drain peatlands before they plant, and Indonesia's drainage canals now run about 285,000 km, enough to circle the Earth seven times. Peat fires make up less than a third of Indonesia's wildfires but produce most of the haze. And fires burn on land that someone holds, which is why Singapore can name seven companies.

The damage does not stop at our lungs. Indonesia's Forestry Ministry has flagged fires near Tanjung Puting National Park, one of Borneo's most important orangutan habitats. The carbon bill is just as steep. By mid-September, this year's fires had released 76.2 megatonnes of carbon, about a third of the world's fire emissions. That puts Indonesia's pledge to make its forests a net carbon sink by 2030 in doubt; even its Forestry Ministry will only say it is "cautiously optimistic." Haze is not just a neighborly quarrel. It is a line item on the planet's carbon budget.

Some landholders live closer to home than the neighbors like to admit. In August, an Indonesian lawmaker reminded Malaysia and Singapore that their companies and citizens also run plantations in Indonesia. In October, Greenpeace and Pantau Gambut identified entities linked to haze-source points, some with Malaysian and Singaporean connections, though satellite data alone does not establish liability. Jakarta, for its part, is pursuing about 30 companies for nearly Rp 15 trillion. On haze, every finger pointed across a border has a few pointing back.

Accountability has been elusive in every direction. Singapore's 2015 notices to six companies ended when the firms said they no longer held the land, and NEA closed the cases. Malaysia's own cross-border haze bill was approved by Cabinet in 2020, then shelved after a change of government.

Still, suppose haze really is natural. Then the region should prepare as it does for monsoon floods, with money, infrastructure, and people. On that test, ASEAN comes up short.

Start with the money. In 2007, ASEAN environment ministers agreed to set up a haze fund with an initial target of $500,000. Because contributions were voluntary, the fund was only half filled by 2014. For a crisis that closes schools in four countries, that is loose change. A newer ASEAN framework aims to mobilize $1.5 billion by 2030, but a mobilization target is not money in the bank.

Restoration is more encouraging, but fragile. After Indonesia created its Peatland Restoration Agency in 2016, rewetting cut peatland fires by 38% compared with 2015. Yet a study covering

2015 to 2024 found that 70% of canal-blocking units were damaged. Like a gym membership, restoration only works if someone keeps showing up, and emergency diplomacy never pays for upkeep.

Then there is coordination. ASEAN's haze coordinating center, hosted by Indonesia, was designated in 2016 and established in 2023, and opened its office in April. It still awaits a presidential regulation to become fully operational, so the ASEAN Secretariat stands in. The region's smoke detector, ASEAN's meteorological center, sits in Singapore and has been sounding the alarm since August. The fire station is still only half open.

Whether ASEAN treats haze as a crime or a calamity, it has run out of reasons to wait. The Manila meetings should produce four commitments.

1. **Call it a disaster, not an alibi.** If haze enters ASEAN's disaster framework, the designation should include attribution at the concession level. Faster help should not mean less accountability.
2. **Stop passing the hat.** A regional fund should be sized to the problem and tied to published targets for peat rewetting and canal-block repair.
3. **The smoke detector works. Staff the fire station.** Member states should set a firm date for the coordinating center to become fully operational, backed by a pre-cleared roster of firefighting aircraft and crews. Offers of help should not wait days for a reply.
4. **Follow the smoke to the stock exchange.** Singapore and Malaysia should require companies listed on their exchanges, and the banks that lend to them, to disclose concession maps and fire records for land they hold abroad. Regulating domestic parent companies, as Malaysian legal scholars have argued, sidesteps sovereignty questions entirely. Firms that trade on green credentials should be able to show their land is not on fire.

The monsoon will clear the skies within weeks, as it usually does. That is precisely the problem. When the haze lifted in 2015, the gym filled up again, and everyone moved on. Every year, rain turns up before commitments do.

ASEAN can call haze a disaster or a crime. What it cannot keep doing is leaving the rain to do its job.