

Burning forests should be burning issue at UN meet

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For The Straits Times

The United Nations General Assembly must take the strongest stand in its power to help avert an irreversible climate catastrophe when it holds its annual gathering this week. Top of that agenda should be to use its influential voice to stop the wholesale burning of the world's tropical forests. These blazes are not a country-specific issue; they inflict enormous transboundary and global damage.

The UN should consider the burning of forests a crime against humanity, name the perpetrators, demand action from national leaders and financially support measures to combat these blazes.

The human-generated fires in the remaining forests of Indonesia's Kalimantan and Sumatra islands and in Brazil's Amazon rainforest are extreme in scale. In a vicious circle, these fires aggravate global warming, which in turn makes the fires more rampant.

The devastation comes at a time when the vital signs for South-east

Asia, and the rest of the world, are headed in the wrong direction. Carbon dioxide emissions have risen to the dangerous level of 415 parts per million globally. Temperatures are hitting new record highs in Singapore and other parts of the world.

A recent International Monetary Fund (IMF) report says: "One of the most vulnerable regions to climate change (South-east Asia) is witnessing the world's biggest jump in greenhouse gas emissions."

Another ominous feature of this year's fires is that in Brazil, the culprits are getting a nod from the deregulation policy of President Jair Bolsonaro, who took office this year, even though previous periods of high deforestation in the country never coincided with high economic growth.

Brazil's anti-environmental stance has, in turn, the backing of US President Donald Trump. In the name of economic growth, the United States, too, is pursuing anti-environmental policies – among them, withdrawing from the Paris climate change agreement, reversing carbon emission controls on power plants, and lowering emission and



A resident fleeing his home in Indonesia's Central Kalimantan on Sunday, amid fire and haze from the burning forest. The UN General Assembly must, at its meeting this week, produce an actionable resolution on the destruction of forests in Indonesia and the Amazon, the impact of which affects everyone on our planet, says the writer. PHOTO: EPA-EFE

efficiency standards for automobiles. These policies will aggravate global warming and lower the chances of achieving long-term growth.

Indeed, destroying the environment is not a viable growth strategy anywhere.

The other big message from these fires concerns doing no harm to one's neighbours.

The fires in the Amazon cannot be viewed as purely a country matter – as Brazil's President preposterously claims. The smoke and other environmental effects from large tracts of forest land being set ablaze endanger the

health and well-being of people in neighbouring countries, as is happening now with the fires raging in Indonesia.

The fires in Indonesia have been a yearly event for the past quarter-century as large tracts of forest are burned to make way for oil palm plantations as well as for the paper and pulp industry.

What is different now about these fires is not only their scale but also the way they are being worsened by climate change.

As in Brazil, corruption in Indonesia stokes destructive agricultural practices.

Neighbours, too, are complicit

when their agri-business companies and loggers are not held accountable for slash-and-burn agriculture and other shady practices that keep fuelling these fires year after year.

More should be done to hold responsible these corrupt businesses, whether they are national or transnational. When fires set within Indonesia's borders hurt the health of its neighbours, the responsibility in the first instance rests with the Indonesian government. And when the fires from the Brazilian Amazon hurt people in Bolivia, Colombia or Venezuela, it is a Brazilian crime.

The Asean Specialised Meteorological Centre says the principal source of the current haze is Indonesia. President Joko Widodo's government should make good on its promise to prosecute those responsible for the fires.

Malaysia and Singapore have been on the receiving end of haze from Indonesia for years. Children, the elderly, the infirm and the poor are among the hardest hit. The two South-east Asian countries along with Brazil's neighbours, Bolivia and Colombia, should highlight at the UN General Assembly the environmental, health and economic costs of inaction against the corrupt companies wreaking havoc in their respective regions. They should also indicate what needs doing to stop these practices. As the architect of the Paris climate agreement, the UN must, as the climate crisis deepens, produce an actionable resolution on the destruction of the forests in Indonesia and the Amazon, the impact of which affects everyone on our planet.

Yes, it's hard to imagine the UN coming out with guns blazing, but that is what it must do. There also needs to be international financial support for putting out these fires. Together with multilateral development banks, including the IMF and World Bank, the UN should also extend compensatory financing to countries protecting their forests.

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