

Indonesia: Government's seriousness in dealing with poor air quality questioned

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Jakarta — The Indonesian Forum for the Environment (Walhi) has criticised government efforts to overcome air pollution headed up by Coordinating Minister for Maritime Affairs and Investment Luhut Binsar Pandjaitan.

The government has highlighted a number of issues such as reducing deforestation, accelerating the use of electric vehicles and using water mist generators on tall building.

Walhi urban affairs and pollution campaign head Abdul Ghofar says that reducing deforestation should indeed have been started long ago. But the current air pollution problem is not just because of deforestation — rather it is also effected by forest and land fires (karhutla). Ghofar said that this effect is mostly found in Sumatra and Kalimantan.

“Outside the big cities in regions like Sumatra and Kalimantan the air quality is also quite bad. The cause of the air pollution in areas other than cities, the majority is from the forestry sector, yeah, or from land [fires]”, Ghofar told CNN Indonesia on Tuesday September 3.

“It’s not a single problem, it’s quite unfortunate if for example the government only identifies the issue of deforestation and then says, oh, deforestation has declined, meaning air pollution from deforestation is low”, he continued.

Ghofar said that forest and land fires are getting worse again. Based on Walhi’s records, there are 7,800 hotspots, some of which are in company concession areas.

“Meaning there’s burning going on, burning by companies for land and plantation clearing, especially palm oil. But [the government] is only focusing on deforestation while incidents of forest and land fires, some of which are occurring in company concession areas, are still high”, he explained.

Ghofar also highlighted the government’s push to accelerate the use of electric vehicles. According to Ghofar, there is a bias between this effort to overcome the air pollution problem and businesses that are owned by some government officials.

He said there are a number of government officials at the ministerial level that own businesses in the electric vehicle sector.

“I’m not prepared to mention any names, but there are several public officials at the ministerial level and under them that do indeed own electric vehicle businesses. This policy obscures the interests of the ordinary people and business interests”, he said.

In addition to this, the process of making electric vehicles is also inseparable from power generation and materials which are currently seen as big contributors to emissions, namely coal and nickel.

Ghofar also believes that the subsidies being offered by the government for the purchase of electric vehicles should be reallocated to subsidise public transport.

We think that these big subsidies could actually be reallocated to subsidise public transport, then to subsidise the purchase of new armadas for cities that don't yet have adequate [public] transportation", he said.

Furthermore, he also took up the issue of water spraying using the mist generators on tall buildings. According to Ghofar, the effectiveness of water spraying has not yet been proven to reduce air pollution.

"If it only becomes a new project, it's a shame, especially if the burden falls on the private sector who own tall buildings to install water mist [generators]", he said.

Ghofar also questioned the government's seriousness in overcoming the air pollution problem because the air quality in a number of regions is still getting worse.

"Regarding the efforts to overcome air pollution that are being carried out by the government, so far the air quality in Jakarta and surrounding areas is still getting worse", he said.

CNN Indonesia

Translated by James Balowski.

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