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## *Global Update*

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### **Health Effects of the Forest Fires in South-East Asia**

According to information received by the World Health Organization (WHO), the air pollution caused by the forest fires in Indonesia is at emergency levels and serious health problems are affecting and will continue to affect a large number of people in the region if the fires are not extinguished very soon and current meteorological conditions prevail. This particularly serious situation has already persisted for several weeks and the weather forecasts are not favourable for the situation to change substantially. The longer the exposure to the air pollution, which is mainly caused by the accumulation of fine particles, the more serious the effects will be, particularly for vulnerable groups of the population, like people with chronic respiratory problems, infants and the elderly. In September only, the number of additional hospital admissions in Sarawak, Malaysia, alone were more than 26000.

From the beginning of this environmental disaster, WHO has been concerned by its potential health impact and has been in touch with the health ministries of the countries involved. Through its regional and country offices in the South-East Asia and Western Pacific Regions of WHO, the Organization is providing technical services and equipment to cope with the worsening situation, as well as experts to advise the national and local health authorities on

the measures to be taken, particularly if the fires persist. The Director-General of WHO in close coordination with the Directors of the Western Pacific and South East Asia Regions, will provide US \$ 200,000 for technical advisory services and equipment.

At this stage, WHO endorses the recommendations already made by the governments to lessen the health effects of air pollution. This includes wearing respiratory masks, staying indoors as much as possible, keeping windows and doors closed, and seeking medical advice when called for. It should be noted, however, that in view of the small size of the particles, home-made or other commonly available masks do not ensure complete health protection.

The situation in Kuching, Sarawak, Malaysia, shows extremely high concentrations of suspended particulate matter with aerometric diameter below 10 micrometre which can readily enter the lower respiratory tract. The health effects of this type of acute pollution include exacerbations of cough and lower respiratory symptoms with resulting increased use of bronchodilators by asthmatic patients, increases in hospital admissions and in daily mortality. In addition to these acute effects, chronic effects such as increased incidence of chronic bronchitis are likely to follow. Incomplete combustion of wood is associated also with the emission of other compounds which exacerbate the health effects of suspended particulate matter.

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Abstracted from the World Health Organization Press Release WHO/70, 26 September 1997.