

KERATAN AKHBAR

JUDUL AKHBAR : NEW STRAITS TIMES

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MUKA SURAT : 8

HAZE-RELATED ILLNESSES

Respiratory infection and conjunctivitis cases increase

PUTRAJAYA: Cases of upper respiratory tract infections rose 10.43 per cent, while conjunctivitis cases increased 26.47 per cent, according to haze-related disease monitoring at 78 selected Health Ministry facilities nationwide.

In its latest surveillance figures, the ministry said upper respiratory tract infections rose from 3,509 cases in Epidemiological Week 39 to 3,875 in Week 40, while conjunctivitis cases increased from 102 to 129.

Asthma cases, however, fell 13.64 per cent from 535 to 462.

Up to 8am yesterday, 32 air quality monitoring stations across eight states and two federal territories recorded Air Pollutant Index (API) readings of between 101 and 200, classified as "unhealthy".

The latest figures have renewed

calls for the government to move beyond diplomatic engagement and take stronger action against the sources of haze.

Bar Council Criminal Law Committee chairman Vivekananda Sukumaran said the prolonged haze should be treated as a public health emergency.

While welcoming Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim's contact with Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto and cloud-seeding efforts, he said these measures were insufficient without stronger enforcement and legal accountability.

He backed calls by His Majesty Sultan Ibrahim, King of Malaysia, and Johor Regent Tunku Mahkota Ismail for school closures to protect pupils from prolonged exposure to unhealthy air.

The Education Ministry low-

ered the school closure threshold from an API reading of 200 to above 180, or above 150 if readings persisted for three consecutive days.

Vivekananda said the revised thresholds should be made permanent and supported by Malaysia's MyCMAQ air quality forecasting model.

He also proposed free N95

masks for vulnerable groups, air purifiers in classrooms in badly affected districts and federal guidelines on outdoor work and flexible working hours.

On enforcement, he called for a transboundary haze pollution bill to be tabled, with provisions for criminal and civil liability for companies responsible for pollution affecting Malaysia.

Vivekananda said the legislation had been under consideration since 2018, but the government was still studying Singapore's legal framework.

He also called for Malaysia to use upcoming Asean engagements to push for enforceable regional commitments, a fully operational haze coordinating centre and traceable supply chains.

Haze choking the hills on the outskirts of Kuantan, Pahang, yesterday. NSTP PIC BY MUHAMMAD DELIMA ATAN