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The Editor

Dear Sir/Mdm

TRANSCRIPT OF TALKING POINT'S INTERVIEW WITH
MR YEO CHEOW TONG, MINISTER FOR THE ENVIRONMENT, ON SMOKE HAZE SITUATION

Please see attached the transcript of Talking Point's interview with Mr Yeo Cheow Tong, Minister for the Environment, on smoke haze situation. Talking Point carried the story on 20 May 99. The information is for your use.

We would appreciate it if you would run a story on it. Please contact SPRO Billy Chew at Tel 7319855, if you have any queries.

PUBLIC AFFAIRS DEPARTMENT
MINISTRY OF THE ENVIRONMENT

National Archives of Singapore

TRANSCRIPT OF TALKING POINT'S (CHANNEL NEWS ASIA) INTERVIEW WITH MR YEO CHEOW TONG,
MINISTER FOR THE ENVIRONMENT ON SMOKE HAZE SITUATION, 20 MAY 99

Reporter: Minister, welcome to the programme. May I ask you about the situation this year about the haze.

Recently, it has been very hot over the last few days. How much is that due to the
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haze and how much is it due to natural?

Minister Yeo: In terms of the weather over the last few days, I think it is part of the natural pattern. There is nothing to do with the haze. With regards to the overall expectation for this year, the weather experts around the world, especially in developed countries, expect the La Nina effect to continue through to almost the end of this year. Which means we are likely to see a wetter year than normal, but probably not as wet as what we had last year. And this means that the dry weather will come back over the next few months but the dry weather would not be as bad as what we saw in 1997 when in Indonesia many of the rivers even dried up. So, we are likely to see some fires but because of the intermittent rain from the La Nina effect, the fires won't be as large a scale as what we had in 1997. And, therefore, the haze, whilst we can expect it, will also not be as bad as 1997.

Reporter: What can we actually expect on the weather?

Minister Yeo: We can expect PSI, probably hovering between 80 to 100 during the hazy period. We are unlikely to see extensive haze like what we had in 1997 when we had periods of over 120 PSI.

Reporter: What action is ENV doing in anticipation of the haze and the harmful effect of haze?

Minister Yeo: Firstly, in terms of tackling the source of the haze, we have been working with our neighbours in the region to encourage our Indonesian friends to enforce their laws more actively. They have the necessary legislative powers now to enforce and we would like them to show some resolve in enforcing. We would also like to encourage them to enhance their fire-fighting capabilities because whilst we have in place a monitoring mechanism using satellite technology and... we have put in place a communications programme...

Reporter (interjected): but what did they do with the help...

Minister Yeo: Yes, we help them quite a fair bit in terms of providing them with the necessary equipment which they need. We hope that they will be able to make better use of (it for) their early warning.

Reporter: How would that help the Indonesians?

Minister Yeo: By alerting them to the fires while they are still small. They can then take active action to fight the fires. Then, at least prevent the fires from growing and becoming a bigger problem subsequently.

Reporter: Minister, in Indonesia now, there are many kinds of fires, including the political one. How does that affect Indonesia's ability to take care of this particular issue?

Minister Yeo: Well, undoubtedly. Even the Indonesians themselves have told us this; that in view of the political problems they are facing now, plus the economic problems, their ability has been pretty much affected; which is why the enforcement is very important because "enforcement" means that they will be able to nip the problem in the bud and not even have to worry about fires. And what we've done also is to provide global positioning equipment; as in the past, one problem they faced was that when they went to the sites of the fires, they couldn't really identify who owned that piece of land. Now, with the GPS system which we have given them, they can actually identify where the fire is and go back to their land records and find out who is the plantation owner, and with their presumption clause now, the land owner is presumed to have started the fires unless he can prove that he didn't. So with the presumption clause and they know who the plantation owner is, it means they can actually take very strong action against the plantation owners and I think once the message is clearly transmitted to the plantation owners, most of them will comply and that has been the experience of Malaysia and Brunei, the two countries which have implemented this presumptive approach to enforcement.

Reporter: Have (the fires in) the Malaysia and Brunei this year a lot less than last year?

Minister Yeo: Oh, a lot less. Ever since they started this system, the numbers of fires that have experienced have gone down dramatically.

Reporter: Malaysia and Brunei, when did they enforce the presumption clause and how much success has it been?

Minister Yeo: They introduced this presumption clause, from what I understand, in 1997, in response to the fires that were also taking place in Malaysia and Brunei. After they implemented this clause, the plantation owners got the message because the penalties involved were very hefty, and they realised that it is a lot cheaper to clear land using proper means than to resort to the use of fires for land clearing because the penalties are so heavy.

Reporter: Even if the Indonesians implement this law, how long can we expect the haze to last this year?

Minister Yeo: Well, if you go by the normal weather pattern, the dry season will start about May, which is about now, and will last until around September. This is the normal dry weather pattern when the winds are blowing towards Singapore as well. So, if we can experience minimal fires up to about September, then I think we should be fairly well off.

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Reporter: What do you think the chances of the haze returning ?

Minister Yeo: It depends very much on firstly whether the Indonesians are able to enforce their laws effectively and secondly whether they can reach out to educate the plantation owners and the small time farmers on the alternative methods for land clearing. Because it is one thing to say that you cannot use fire but you also need to teach them what are the alternatives, and I think that is an equally important aspect.

Reporter: Is that a slight difference compared to 1997 or is there less burning this year ?

Minister Yeo: There is less burning this year because the dry season hasn't set in yet. Because of the La Nina effect, although it is the start of the dry season, there is enough rain there to make sure that the ground doesn't get dry and parched.

Reporter: Has there been simultaneous burning?

Minister Yeo: There have been fires but because the ground is still fairly wet, the fires don't have the chance to grow to the massive scale that we saw in 1997.

Reporter: For Singaporeans this year, do they need to rush out to buy masks and to take precautionary measures, is it necessary ?

Minister Yeo: We have to keep our fingers crossed that our current situation will still continue.

Reporter: What is the worst case scenario for this year?

Minister Yeo: Well, like I said just now, it depends very much on the impact of the La Nina. If what the weather experts have forecasted comes true, then the haze will be fairly light. But if the La Nina dissipates more rapidly than anticipated and the dry weather gets back and the land is parched, then it's anybody's guess as to how much land will be burnt.

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