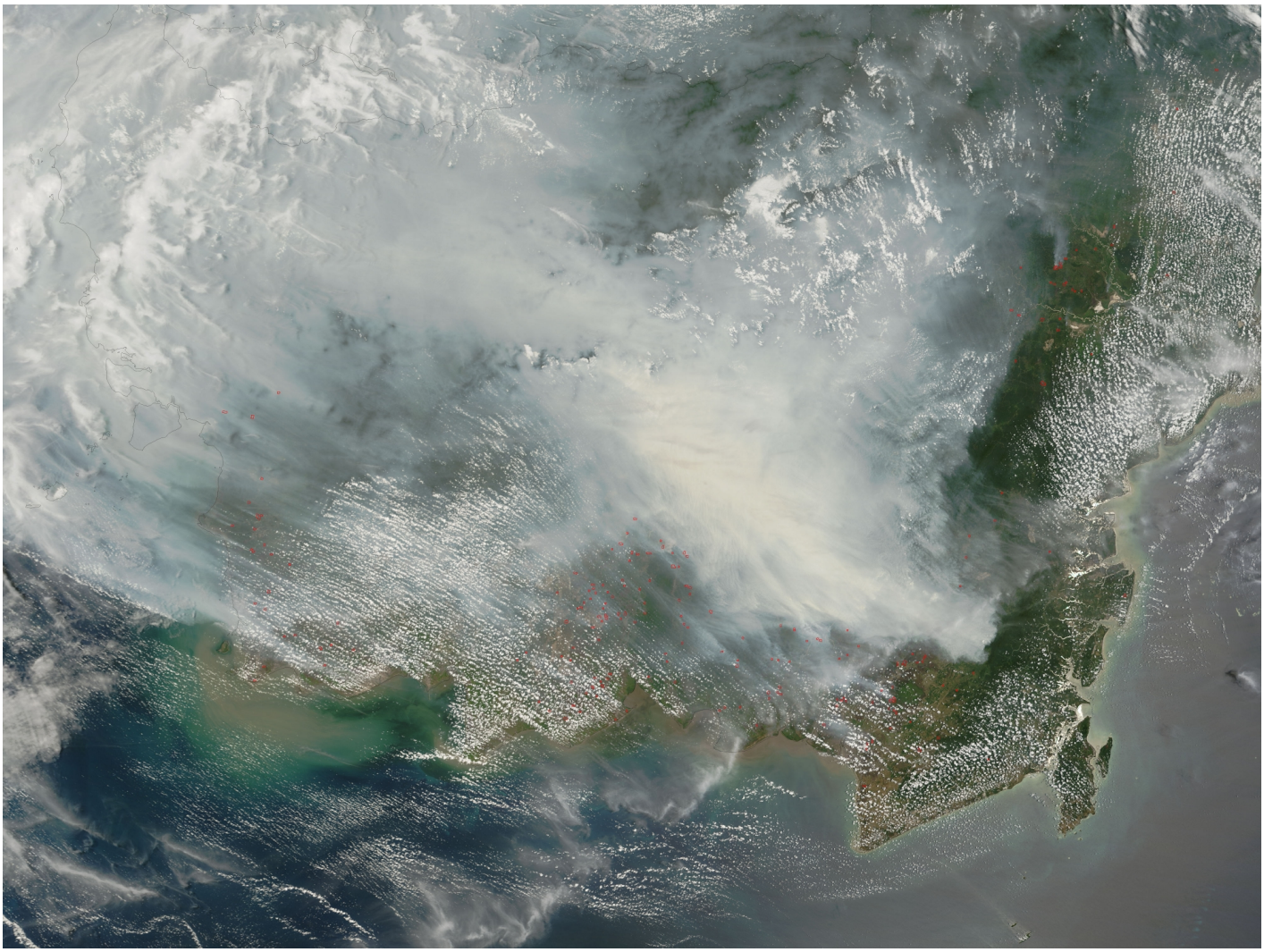
SCHOOLS SHUT, FLIGHTS DIVERTED AS SOUTHEAST ASIA'S HAZE WORSENS

News / Airlines



The haze blanketing parts of Southeast Asia worsened as smoke from Indonesian forest fires forced Malaysia to close schools in some states and divert flights, and put Singapore's Formula One race at risk after other outdoor events were canceled.

The city-state's three-hour pollutant index surged to 249 as of 9:00 p.m. on Monday, the highest this year and crossing into the "very unhealthy" range for a second day. The gauge also climbed to a similar level in parts of Indonesia's Kalimantan and Sumatra. In neighboring Malaysia, the air quality reached unhealthy levels in Kuala Lumpur and several states, leading to closures of more than 2,000 schools in those areas.

Singapore Environment Minister Vivian Balakrishnan reiterated the city-state's concerns about the haze to his Indonesian counterpart Siti Nurbaya, and extended its offer to help. Indonesia also agreed to share the names of companies suspected to have caused the fires, the city-state's

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National Environment Agency said. The blazes are often started to clear land for plantations. Indonesian President Joko Widodo ordered the deployment of an additional 1,600 military forces to help in Riau and South Sumatra, the Press Trust of India reported.

Organizers of the Formula One night race in Singapore this weekend, which will also include outdoor concerts by Maroon 5 and Bon Jovi, said they have a "contingency plan" for the haze and will work with relevant agencies before making any decisions on the event.

Low Visibility

The low visibility also affected flights out of Sepang, outside Kuala Lumpur, according to AirAsia Bhd. About 29 flights were either delayed, diverted or canceled Monday because of the haze, the low-cost carrier said. Flights in the northern Penang state and Kuching in east Malaysia were also affected in the past week, the airline said.

The country's Marine Department and Civil Aviation Department issued warnings for the industries to be on high alert as the worsening haze situation reduced visibility in some major cities and towns, the Star reported. Cloud seeding for haze relief may start Tuesday, the Malay Mail reported, citing the Meteorological Department.

Eleven airlines including PT Garuda Indonesia Ltd. and Singapore Airlines Ltd.'s SilkAir rescheduled their flights to Pekanbaru in Riau on Tuesday, the Jakarta Post reported. Malaysia's Minister of Natural Resources and Environment Wan Junaidi Jaafar said Tuesday he will visit Indonesia and meet his counterpart soon.

Private Jets

In Singapore, two private jets were diverted to Changi airport from Seletar on Monday because visibility was low, Changi Airport Group said in an e-mailed response to queries. The city-state has measures to ensure the continuity of flight operations should the haze condition worsen, it said.

Running events on the island were also affected. Singapore Telecommunications Ltd.'s "Race Against Cancer," which included 10 kilometer and 15 kilometer distances, was canceled on Sunday. The country's prison turned its competitive Yellow Ribbon run into a walk.

Singapore's schools will suspend outdoor and physical activities when pollution levels are in the "very unhealthy" range, the education ministry said, and will consider closing primary and secondary schools when it reaches a "hazardous" level. The pollutant index peaked at 401 in June 2013, forcing schools in Singapore to scrap activities during the term break.

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