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Haze and the Price of Greed

News:

Malaysia's recurring haze has once again disrupted children's education and exposed families to polluted air. On 8 October 2026, the Education Ministry ordered educational institutions in areas recording Air Pollutant Index readings above 180 to close from the following day. Meanwhile, Indonesian environmental organisation WALHI reported that approximately 74 per cent of hotspots detected in Kalimantan between January and July were within corporate concessions, bringing the role of commercial land use under renewed scrutiny.

Comment:

Behind those school closures are parents rearranging their working lives, children confined indoors, and families wondering whether their elderly relatives can withstand another day of polluted air. The figures describe the crisis. These are the people who live with it.

Malaysians, at least, have lived through this before. That familiarity should trouble us. How did breathing smoke become something millions of people are expected to endure whenever the dry season returns? The wind carries the haze, but it does not explain the decisions that make the land burn. Clearing land by fire is cheap. Draining peatlands for plantations leaves them vulnerable to fires that smoulder underground long after the flames disappear. The savings belong to the business; the suffering reaches households far beyond its boundaries.

Hotspots within concessions do not, by themselves, establish who started each fire, but they do demand serious investigation. When the smoke returns year after year, people have every reason to ask why those responsible remain so difficult to hold accountable. Indonesia's drive to expand palm-based biodiesel deepens this concern. Proposals to turn millions of hectares of degraded forest into plantations may promise energy security. But who protects the forest from being destroyed first and declared suitable for conversion afterwards? Behind these questions lies a deeper failure. Under capitalism, land becomes an investment, forests become commercial opportunities, and public suffering becomes a cost someone else must carry. Where corporate wealth and political power protect one another, another law or regional meeting offers little comfort to the family breathing polluted air tonight.

Islam places a different responsibility upon the state. Forests essential to communal life belong to the public and must be managed for their benefit. Agricultural ownership carries the duty to cultivate responsibly. No claim to profit grants permission to harm others.

However, these obligations require institutions with the authority to enforce them. Within the Khilafah (Caliphate), the Qadi Hisbah (public rights judge) protects public rights and acts against manifest violations. Those proven responsible must face penalties proportionate to the harm they cause, whether they are smallholders, corporate owners or government officials.

But these principles cannot fulfil their purpose while confined within a capitalist order that continues to reward the practices they prohibit. Their implementation requires the Khilafah to apply the Shariah comprehensively, bringing ownership, economic policy and accountability under the same obligation to protect the people.

For the mother watching her child cough, that responsibility is deeply personal. She should not have to wait for changing winds to bring relief. Nor should another generation grow up accepting that the price of someone else's prosperity is the air in their lungs.

We must demand more than another season of endurance. We must work to re-establish Islam as a comprehensive way of life through the re-establishment of the Khilafah, so that protecting life governs the decisions made before the first fire is lit.

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