

POLLUTION

Chiang Mai pleads for help on haze

POST REPORTERS

Local leaders in Chiang Mai are making desperate pleas to Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha as the air pollution crisis in the North continues to worsen.

"People are dying. Patients are streaming into hospitals to be treated for breathing problems due to the bad air," wrote Wirachai Chaimongkhon, the kamnan of tambon Padat in Chiang Mai's Muang district, on his Facebook page.

"The provincial government cannot deal with this matter alone," he continued. "The haze is a national problem and the central government must take the lead."

Mr Wirachai, who is also chief of the Chiang Mai-based kamnan-village association, said that politicians should not only think about forming a new government, and called on them to coordinate to address the haze woes.

He warned that if the government does not step in to help address the issue, the haze will negatively impact tourists' perception of Thailand, especially since many will be coming to celebrate the world-famous Songkran festivities.

Since February, the air concentrations of PM2.5 pollutants have soared beyond the safe thresholds set by the government and World Health Organization (WHO).

Yesterday, PM2.5 levels in Chiang Rai's Mae Sai district reached an alarming level of 356 microgrammes per cubic metre ($\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$), according to readings at the Pollution Control Department's official air monitoring stations.

The situation forced Mae Fah Luang University to suspend classes today and tomorrow. The university is using its libraries and meeting rooms as "refuges" for people as the haze persists.

Thailand has set the safe threshold for prolonged exposure to PM2.5 pollutants at $50 \mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$, while the WHO's limit is just $25 \mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$.

Wijarn Simachaya, permanent secretary for natural resources and environment, admitted that forest and field fires this year are more severe because of a combination of stagnant air, dry and hot weather, and the availability of combustible material.

He blamed the worsening condition on people who continue to set fire to forests to clear land for agricultural purposes, despite the government having issued a ban on outdoor burning to help curb the haze.

According to the head of the Royal Forest Department, Atthaphon Charoenchansa, this year's haze is compounded by high levels of transboundary pollutants from Thailand's neighbouring countries.

"Up to 90% of the smoke seen in Mae Hong Son is believed to have come from Myanmar," he said yesterday, citing a recent satellite image which detected increasing number of fire hotspots in the northern region, as well as Laos and Myanmar.

As of yesterday, there were up to 1,151 hotspots across Chiang Mai, Mae Hong Son and Chiang Rai, according to the department.