

# 'Big firm' blamed for the North's smog nightmare

EXPERTS SEE LITTLE CHANGING AFTER PRAYUT'S VISIT, BLAME GOVT'S POLICY TO PUSH CORN CULTIVATION

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THE NATION

THE PRESSING problem of Chiang Mai's serious air pollution needs much more than just the attention of Prime Minister General Prayut Chan-o-cha, who will fly today to this northern province to follow up on anti-haze efforts.

Eminent medical specialists based in Chiang Mai, the capital of the North, have warned that the health impacts from prolonged exposure to smog are real, and urgent tangible solutions are necessary.

"Will the prime minister engage a giant firm in addressing the problem?" Prof Dr Chaicharn Pothirat, a medical specialist in lung diseases at the CMU Faculty of Medicine, asked.

According to him, corn plantations are now the major cause of air pollution. Many corn farmers have cleared unwanted weeds from their plantations using fire to ease the work of harvest.

"And a big firm buys corn from these farmers. This firm should show responsibility," Chaicharn said.

The medical lecturer lamented that Prayut's visit to Chiang Mai would not

really help ease the smog.

"He will spend just a few hours here. So, I think it's more like a PR stunt," he said.

Chaicharn said the government policy to encourage farmers to grow corn after the rice season might have also contributed to the current serious smog crisis.

At present, there are 7 million rai of corn plantations in the country. The North is the biggest grower, accounting for 4.5 million rai of corn fields. Chaicharn's colleague, Dr Rungsrit Kanjanavanit, who sits on the Chiang Mai working panel on fighting air pollution, said he had put forward four demands to the prime minister.

Firstly, he said the Pollution Control Department (PCD) should stop releasing just the 24-hour mean average of small dust particles, which could disguise the fact that the PM2.5 levels were dangerously high during certain hours of the day. "The PCD should release real-time air-pollution levels and issue proper alerts," he said.

He said the Disease Control Department (DCD) also should officially recognise the health impacts from dust and send a clear message across to the public.

"Don't just say you have not seen any health impacts from the dust yet. Health

problems associated with air pollution will become visible in the long run, the same way smokers will feel the adverse impacts from their cigarettes," Rungsrit said. Smog is associated with respiratory disorders, heart diseases, skin irritation and more.

Chiang Mai has been struggling with heavy air pollution for a few months already. The amount of PM2.5 – particulate matter no more than 2.5 millimetres in diameter – in the province has been usually above safe limits. Despite loud complaints every day by people who know about the smog's dangerous impact, an end to the problem is not yet in sight.

At present, agricultural fires are identified as the main cause of smog.

Rungsrit said the Chiang Mai governor should have made better preparations because he must have known from the very beginning that hotspots caused air pollution every year.

"Last, but not least, I demand that no one politicise the smog issue," he said. Lately, rumours have been spread that some people are deliberately setting fires in forests to worsen the air pollution in order to discredit the Prayut-led administration.

Prayut, the sole PM candidate of the Phalang Pracharat Party, still has a chance of returning as the prime minister.

The PM2.5 levels in some parts of Chiang Mai on Saturday almost to 800 micrograms per cubic metre of air, a far cry from the safe limit of 50 micrograms.

"My utmost demand is that efforts to solve the air pollution be systematic and there be a clear-cut timeline," Chaicharn said. "Don't just talk, otherwise the problem will recur."

Chiang Mai is not the only northern province suffering under the smog crisis. Neighbouring provinces are also facing the same predicament.

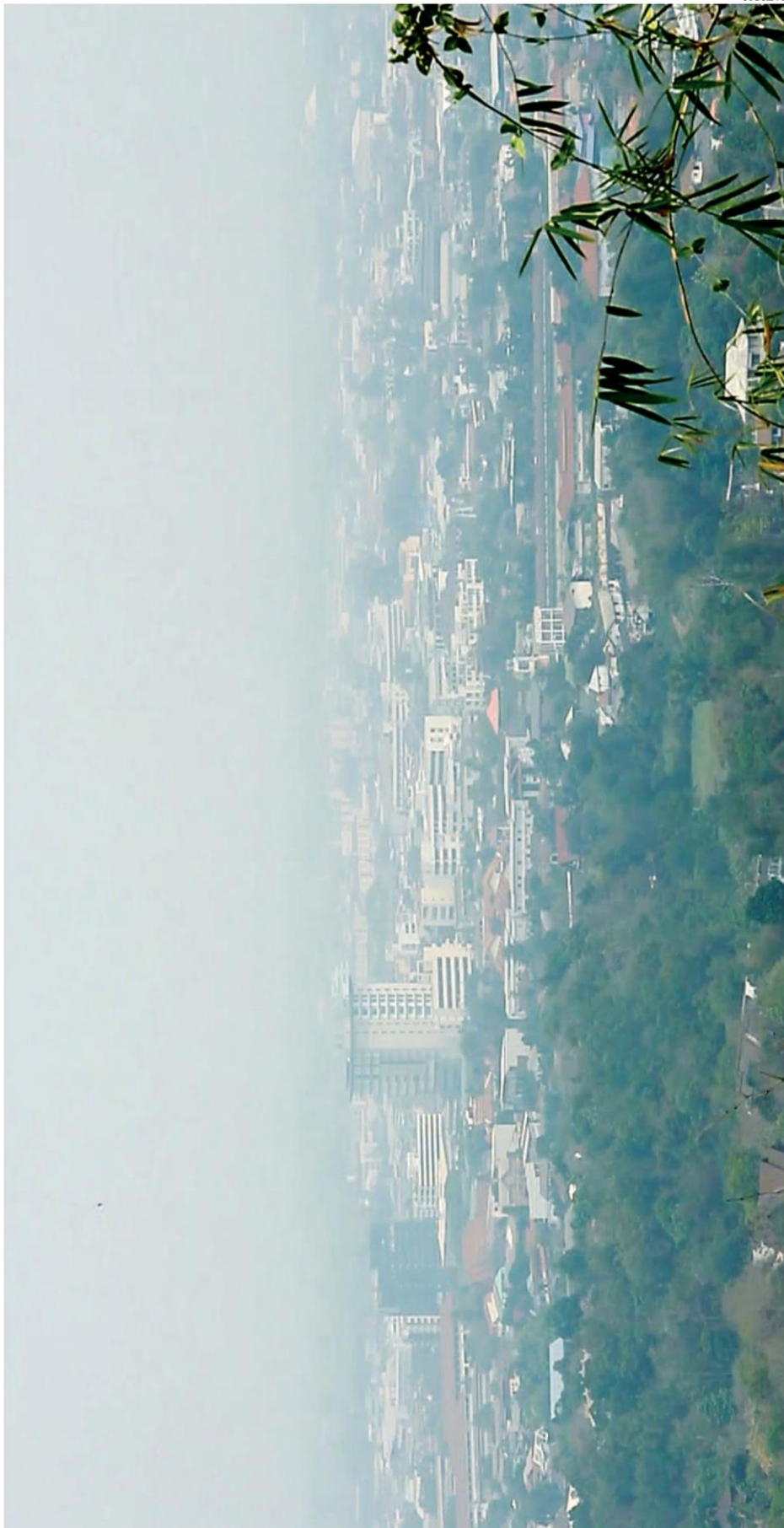
Calls for the Upper North to be declared a smog disaster zone are growing louder now, and the region's smog-generating forest fires soared to 3,088 hotspots.

Deputy National Police commissioner Pol General Srivara Ransibrahmanakul said police had already arrested 230 suspects for setting fires in forests.

Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai and Mae Hong Son yesterday continued their calls for urgent donations of N95-grade face masks for public distribution.

As Chiang Mai academics urged people to refrain from all outdoor activities and to wear N95 masks during this period, private schools such as Montfort College and Prince Royal's College installed air-purifiers in their classrooms and advised students to wear N95 masks.

Chiang Rai's Mae Fah Luang University, meanwhile, suspended classes and all outdoor activities yesterday and today, while spraying water around the campus. It opened two conference halls at the E4 multipurpose building, which were equipped with air purifiers for students and personnel to seek refuge.



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The Muang district of Chiang Rai province is blanketed in haze yesterday as its governor Prajon Prachasakul held an urgent meeting on measures to tackle the problem. The northern province has been afflicted by about 1,300 smog-generating forest fires over the past 15 days.