



Deadly shroud



STILL PICTURES / TANTYO BANGUN

▲ A farmer stands in front of a burning forest in Tanjung Puting National Park, Kalimantan, Indonesia.

For several months, an area of South-East Asia from the Philippines to Australia was enveloped in smog, caused by forest fires in Java, Borneo, Sulawesi, Irian Jaya and Sumatra. Over a million hectares were destroyed.

There was not a living creature that did not suffer. Millions of people from Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Brunei, Thailand and the Philippines coughed and choked, rubbed their eyes and stayed indoors. For some it was more serious: a plane crashed, ships collided and hospitals reported increased numbers of deaths directly caused by the forest fires and the smoke. Business, including tourism, suffered badly.

By October 1997, the man-made forest and plantation fires had spread a huge



▲ Forest fires in Central Kalimantan, Indonesia.

grey haze in front of the sun in Indonesia, Singapore and large parts of Malaysia. Disturbing and depressing, but not unusual or alarming, as it has happened before. Tragically, after some weeks, the fires were burning out of control and people were literally choking to death. Monsoon rains, which normally drench the region during the autumn, were delayed because of the El Niño phenomenon. The Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies of the region distributed hundreds of thousands of face masks but were by and large caught as unprepared as everybody else."

"The Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement needs to put the whole issue of environmental degradation on the agenda," says Johan Schaar, head of the International Federation's regional delegation in Kuala Lumpur. "The National Societies, with close relationships with their governments, should consider how they can advocate on behalf of those whose health may be permanently threatened if this is repeated."

Lasse Norgaard

Lasse Norgaard is the Federation information delegate in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

▼ Kumay, Kalimantan. Motorcyclists brave the heavy smog wearing face masks.





STILL PICTURES / MARK EDWARDS

▲ Kobo tribesman surveys the burning jungle in Sumatra. This area of rainforest has been used by generations for hunting and gathering medicinal plants.