



Global express

The rapid response information series for schools
on development issues in the news

Lethal Smog *Fires rage in SE Asia*

We are witnessing one of the worst ecological disasters caused by humans, which will probably have a devastating impact on the world's environment for years to come. Some scientists have suggested the event could change the global climate more than the eruption of Mount St Helen in the Philippines in 1980.

The events unfold

For many months, a fire raged out of control in the Indonesian rainforests - and we heard little about it.

Then, news broke of a toxic cocktail of lead, carbon monoxide, sulphur dioxide and dust particles choking the air across the Southeast Asian region, affecting around 70 million people. As well as the smoke from the fires, car fumes added to this terrible smog which blocked out the sun completely.

Health alert

Eventually, Indonesia declared a national disaster and Malaysia called a state of emergency in its Borneo island state of Sarawak, as air pollution levels soared way above the level considered dangerous. The effect on people's health has been described as "turning several million people into chain smokers overnight". People were advised to stay indoors or to wear masks if they went out.

The health of millions of people - especially children - in Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, Brunei, the Philippines and Thailand is being damaged, with high rates of eye infections, asthma and lung problems. Experts believe other illnesses will emerge in the future, including cancer.

Who or what is to blame?

Probably, several factors have played a part. Southeast Asian countries are often known as 'tiger' economies for the spectacular economic growth they have achieved in recent years. But much of this growth has been driven by exports, often at the expense of environmental well-being. For years, giant logging companies have plundered the forests of Indonesia, leaving dead trees and vegetation in their wake. Although the Indonesian government has introduced laws to protect the environment, these have never been properly enforced.

Environmentalists argue the richer nations who buy tropical timber have played a big role in this disaster. In 1996, Britain imported 201,650 cubic metres of tropical timber from Indonesia: and more than a million hectares of Indonesian forest is lost to logging each year.

The direct culprits of the smog seem to have been palm oil and industrial

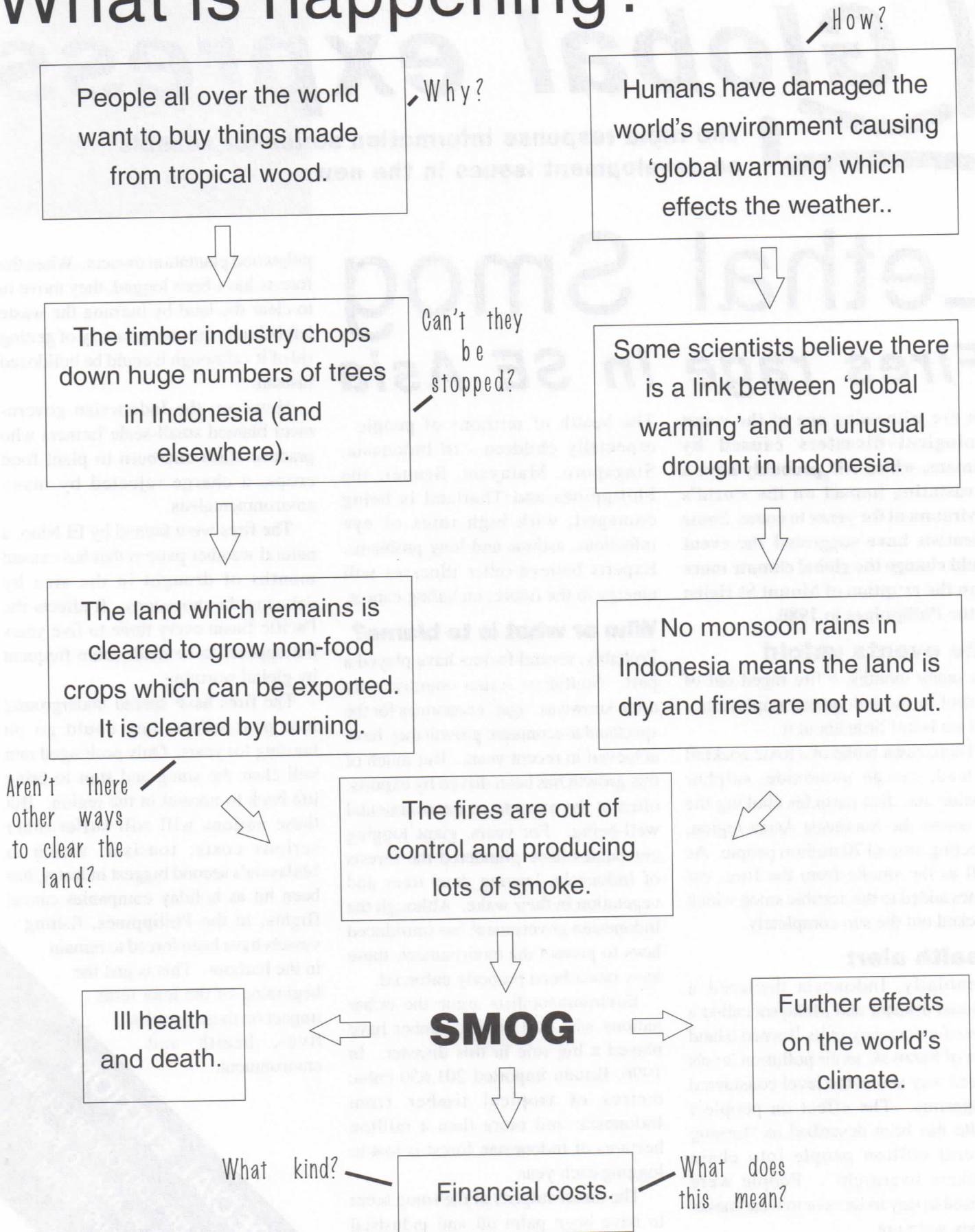
pulpwood plantation owners. When the forests have been logged, they move in to clear the land by burning the waste left behind - the cheapest way of getting rid of it - although it could be bulldozed instead.

However, the Indonesian government blamed small-scale farmers who practise slash-and-burn to plant food crops, a charge rejected by many environmentalists.

The fires were fanned by El Niño, a natural weather pattern that has caused months of drought in the area by delaying the monsoons. It affects the Pacific Basin every three to five years but appears to be made more frequent by global warming.

The fires have spread underground into peat where they could go on burning for years. Only prolonged rain will clear the smog and start to bring life back to normal in the region. But these nations will still suffer other serious costs: tourism, which is Malaysia's second biggest industry, has been hit as holiday companies cancel flights; in the Philippines, fishing vessels have been forced to remain in the harbour. This is just the beginning of the long term impact on these peoples' lives, health and environment.

What is happening?





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