

EXCESSIVE LOGGING, SO CURB NEEDED: PM

By Wong Chun Wai

SERDANG, Thurs. — The Government is curbing the export of round logs and sawn timber from Sabah because almost all the forest areas in the state have been depleted, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today.

The Prime Minister said logging had been carried out in the state without any regard to its effects on the forest and the environment.

"I think there is no timber supply left although at one time Sabah used to export more timber than Sarawak," he told newsmen after a visit to the Malaysian Agricultural Research and Development Institute here.

Dr Mahathir said the Government had no intention of interfering with the affairs of Sabah and that it would only act within its powers.

He refuted allegations by the PBS government that the Government was out to punish the party and state.

"Even when the PBS was in the Barisan Nasional, we had repeatedly

told them to stop the excessive logging but our calls went unheeded," he said, adding that the situation had worsened.

Dr Mahathir was responding to a comment by Sabah Deputy Chief Minister Datuk Yong Teck Lee that the state was seeking a clarification from the Government over the curb in timber export.

Datuk Yong had said that the move was an infringement of the state rights and that Sabah had not been consulted.

He said officials from the Chief Minister's Department had already talked to the Government to clear the confusion.

The Government recently empowered the Malaysian Timber Industry Board to issue timber export licences in Sabah and Sarawak.

Under the revised MTIB Act of 1960, the board can also look into the affairs of the timber sector in Sabah, especially on royalty.

Last week, Primary Industries Minister Datuk Seri Dr Lim Keng Yaik said the revised Act

would cover Sabah and Sarawak but the Government would concentrate on Sabah first because "the situation is different."

He had said there was a lot of abuse in the Sabah timber industry, and that some log exporters were not paying timber royalty despite giving an undertaking to do so.

Dr Mahathir said that despite the extent of logging in Sabah and the large amount in royalties earned, the people did not appear to have gained.

The level of development did not correspond with the amount of royalties earned, he said, adding that he was disappointed with what had happened in Sabah.

Sabah officials had expressed concern that the federal decision will throw Sabah's timber industry out of gear as log exports account for about 14 per cent of the state's annual earnings.

During the first 11 months of last year, log exports made up 13.9 per cent (\$1.1 billion) of the state's total earnings of \$8 billion.