

EIA: States

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KUALA LUMPUR, Mon. — Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today advised State Governments not to ignore the recommendations of environmental impact assessment (EIA) reports when carrying out projects.

He said the Government had the power to act if development projects implemented by State Governments caused environmental degradation.

"For example, a certain State Government may have allowed a factory to operate on State land, but if that factory causes pollution we can still take action," he told reporters after chairing a Barisan Nasional supreme council meeting at the Umno headquarters here.

He was asked to respond to Press reports that certain States had ignored EIA recommendations to speed up development projects.

Reacting to the proposal to set up a panel of consultants to ensure EIA evaluations are made on a uniform basis, Dr Mahathir said the Government wanted to impose standard requirements for all development projects.

He said an EIA report that was strictly followed in one place and disregarded at another would cause problems.

Often, EIA reports for similar projects were based on different standards depending on whether they were prepared by individual consultants or panels of consultants.

"That is why we want to simplify the process to expedite the development process," he added.

Dr Mahathir acknowledged that EIA standards in Malaysia could sometimes be higher than those in developed countries.

Projects had also been interrupted to ensure strict compliance with EIA recommendations, he added.

"This is because the Government gives top priority to environmental preservation and because we are civic-conscious and responsible," he said.

Nevertheless, Dr Mahathir said, it must be remembered that the country's growth is important for the people and unnecessary delays should not be allowed.

He said there would be no time limit for the compilation of EIA reports although the Department of Environment (DOE) had ruled that a report should be completed within four months.

This was because some EIAs needed in-depth study while others did not.

"If a time frame is imposed, it can cause some inconvenience," he added.

Meanwhile, commenting on the same issue, Science, Technology and Environment Minister Law Hieng Ding said State Governments were very supportive of standard guidelines on the preparation of EIA reports.

"We are in the process of simplifying the preparation of EIA reports and are working out a standard format," he told reporters after chairing the sixth meeting of Ministers and State Executive Councillors in charge of environment at the ministry.

Law also said the DOE was now processing EIA reports faster although there was no increase in the number of its staff. It now processes 21 per cent of EIA reports submitted every month compared to only 0.4 per cent previously.

Despite the increased productivity, he said the Government was still not satisfied and the Cabinet had

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must comply

47 out of
103 EIA
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reports
processed

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directed the ministry to establish standard guidelines to further speed up processing.

Until July this year, the ministry had received 103 EIA reports of which 47 had been processed. He described this as a satisfactory feat.

"The delays in the past were not the fault of the DOE. The fault lay with some unqualified and ignorant consultants who submitted incomplete EIA reports," he added.

To overcome the problem of firms employing unqualified consultants, Law said those undertaking the compilation of EIA reports must be registered with the ministry and must comply with a new set of guidelines.

On another matter, he said the ministry had decided to permit local authorities to implement laws governing noise levels as this would be more effective.

"The Cabinet has decided to allow the Road Transport Department to take action against those violating smoke emission standards without the need for the police or DOE officials to be present," he said.

On appeals by quarry operators producing aggregate for the Government to reopen the sites shut down for causing pollution to overcome the current shortage of the material, Law said they would not be allowed to use the shortage as an "excuse" to continue polluting the environment.