

PM wants more details on

KUALA LUMPUR, Tues. — Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said he needed to ascertain the reasons for the reported degazetting of permanent forest reserves in the peninsula.

The Prime Minister said he wanted to know whether these lands were actually degazetted or were used for development purposes.

Dr Mahathir said the country now has a population of more than 19 million people compared to only three million many years ago. This means that space has to be created for living and business purposes.

Dr Mahathir was asked whether he was aware of the degazetting of large tracts of permanent forest reserves in the peninsula as reported

in yesterday's *New Straits Times*.

He was asked whether the Cabinet would be taking any action following the report.

"I need to ascertain whether the forest reserves were degazetted or were used for development ... we can't have the whole country gazetted as a forest reserve.

"Whether we like it or not, our population has increased from just three million to 19 million. We need space for buildings, businesses and for other development purposes.

"I don't know whether this actually took place or not ... I need to find out."

In the report, Forestry director-general Datuk Isma-

il Awang said between 1986 and last year, State Governments degazetted 144,406 hectares of permanent forest reserves despite the fact that there are 800,000ha of land outside the boundaries of permanent reserves available for development.

In **Kuala Terengganu**, Menteri Besar Tan Sri Wan Mokhtar Ahmad said most of the degazetted permanent forest reserves in his State were turned into oil palm plantations.

The degazetted areas were also used for building roads and the opening of new industrial sites. Terengganu degazetted 8,966ha of permanent forest reserves.

Wan Mokhtar said the degazettement was important

for the State's economy.

"The biggest area degazetted is in the Central Terengganu Development Authority (Ketengah) area which has been opened for agriculture, while certain tracts were cleared for the construction of roads.

"The industrial sites which involves the degazettement of permanent forest reserves is also located in Ketengah."

Wan Mokhtar said to facilitate the construction of roads leading to interior villages, certain tracts of forest reserves in Besul, Pasir Raja and Jerangau, all located in Dungun, had to be cleared.

"In fact, when we want to degazette certain areas for development, we will inform the Forestry Depart-

degazetted forest reserves

ment officers, who will then identify areas for replacement.

"Some of these areas identified may not be forested and efforts will be made to plant selected timber species. This way we will be able to maintain the 1.2 million hectares of our permanent forest reserves," the Menteri Besar said.

The State Government is committed to maintaining 1.2 million hectares of permanent forest reserves and that if logging is allowed in such areas, it will involve selective felling of trees.

He said a State Economic Development Corporation subsidiary which was given an area within a permanent forest reserve in Dungun to conduct selective felling

had spent more than RM1 million to replant the area to ensure sustainable yield.

State Forestry Department deputy director Mat Rashid Ibrahim said decisions were also made to construct roads after the forest areas were gazetted.

He said the State Government did not plan for the roads when it first gazetted the reserves.

One example was the construction of a 35km road from Bandar Muktafi Billah Shah to Kampung Pasir Raja which traverses a permanent forest.

Prior to the road's completion in 1989, Kampung Pasir Raja was accessible only by boat via Sungai Dungun.

However, to enable the villagers to benefit from the

rapid development in the oil and gas industry in Paka, Dungun, the State had to degazette a certain stretch of the forest reserve to build the road.

In **Malacca**, Chief Minister Datuk Mohd Zin Abdul Ghani said the State Government would encourage the building of "flatted factories" (multi-storey factories) to optimise land use for industrial development.

This would help the State Government to spare the forests from being cleared for factories.

Mohd Zin, who was responding to a report in the *New Straits Times* that some 339ha of the permanent forest reserves in Malacca have been degazetted, said the State maintained 25

per cent of its size as forest, with 3,943ha as permanent reserves.

Although some of the forest reserves have been degazetted, not all have been cleared for development.

For instance, he said about 80ha of the degazetted forest were for a commercial deer farming in Selandar and several pockets of mangrove forest for tiger prawn projects.

"We need the forest for water catchment purposes and as a buffer to the rapid physical development," he added.

On logging, the Chief Minister said only 110ha of the forests in the State were allowed to be logged on condition replanting was carried out.