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Pairin-Clarify

PAIRIN DEFENDS ACTION IN APPROVING LAND

KOTA KINABALU, June 26 (Bernama) -- Former Chief Minister Datuk Joseph Pairin Kitingan today defended his action three years ago in approving 57,000 hectares of land to a Sarawak company, saying it was not given free as alleged.

He said the area was a pre-logged forest reserve, and not state land, and intended for reafforestation by the Forestry Department.

"Being a reserve land, no title was issued and therefore no premium was to be charged. Therefore, the question of a free gift does not arise," he said in a statement in response to claims by Chief Minister Datuk Yong Teck Lee that he (Pairin) had abused his power as Chief Minister by granting the land.

Yong told the State Assembly last week that Pairin had in 1993 abused his power by approving the land to a Sarawak company for free. Yong repeated the claim last Sunday at a Parti Demokratik Sabah (PDS) function here.

Pairin, the president of Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS), said the Sarawak company was one of the timber companies which had expressed interest to invest in the reafforestation programme then being implemented by the Forestry Department.

"This company had submitted its development plans for the reafforestation project and fulfilled the terms and conditions laid down by the Forestry Department whose advice finally convinced me to give the final approval," he said.

Pairin said even then there were strict procedures to be followed involving the department before the final approval was given.

Being the implementing agency, he said, the department proposed the terms and conditions of the agreement which included a provision for the company to provide a bank guarantee before its proposal could be accepted.

He said the reafforestation project was good for the state and the people since the government would earn revenue by collecting royalties from plantation timber harvested within the forest reserve.

On Yong's claim that Pairin approved 157 hectares of prime land near here to a company registered in the British Virgin Islands, PBS information chief Henrynus Amin said in the same statement there was nothing secret about the identity of the developer.

"Even the current government had invited Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to officiate the ground-breaking ceremony of the project in 1994, and if Yong is not satisfied he should point out the relevant law to nullify the project," he said.

Henrynus also defended Pairin's action in granting a licence to an Australian company to prospect in a 1,000 square kilometres area on the Sabah east coast.

"There is nothing wrong for foreign companies to carry out prospecting activities in Sabah. In fact, there were prospecting permits issued by previous state governments to companies like Esso, Shell, Petronas, Mamut Copper Mining, and others," he added. -- BERNAMA

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