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ACA to help in log smuggling probe

Kamarul Yunus

THE Anti-Corruption Agency (ACA) has been directed to investigate alleged log smuggling in Sabah. At the same time, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has urged all quarters involved to refrain from making any public statement.

Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim said he met Dr Mahathir yesterday morning and the Prime Minister asked him to stress the need to stop issuing public statements to clear the air on alleged log smuggling in the State.

"We should wait for the committee responsible in carrying out investigations to complete an indepth report on the matter," he told reporters after chairing a National Council for Local Authorities meeting in Kuala Lumpur yesterday.

In the meantime, Anwar said, all quarters involved in the issue should not make any public statement that could offend certain people.

"I have directed the ACA to assist in the investigation. Thus, it is not proper for Sabah leaders to hurl accusations or insults, and the same goes for federal leaders.

"This is to ensure that investigations can proceed without disruption or comment that raises tensions or problems," he added.

The issue was highlighted last week after a Port Klang-registered vessel, MV Able Helmsmen, was detained by the Sabah Forestry Department on suspicion of attempting to export logs without approval.

The Sabah Cabinet then formed a committee to investigate the allegations and a report on the findings was handed over to the Prime Minister by Sabah Chief Minister Datuk Yong Teck Lee yesterday. A copy of the report was given to Anwar.

"The state committee set up to investigate the log smuggling activities should take into consideration views and explanation from other agencies involved such as the Malaysian Timber Industry Board (MTIB) of the Primary Industries Ministry.

"That is one of the reasons for the appointment of Datuk Shahbudin Imam Mohamed, the deputy secretary-general (operations) of the Treasury, as the chairman of the committee investigating the log smuggling issue.

"He (Shahbudin) will take into consideration all reports from the Sabah Government, the Forestry Department, Customs and the MTIB," Anwar said, adding the committee will look at all reports and ask for more details or a new report.

"The committee is not necessarily bound by the existing reports given to it. Shahbudin will include the report from the Sabah Government which Chief Minister Datuk Yong Teck Lee has submitted it to me," he added.

Anwar declined to reveal the gist of the report submitted by Yong, saying that the committee investigating the issue needs to view all reports from the relevant authorities.

"To be fair, let us look at all reports, and the investigation is still going on. I know the media is very concern and I am appreciative of the fact that you share my concern.

"However, to do justice, you have to look at all reports. It is not that simple because it involves a lot of departments and procedures," he added.

On the deadline for the investigating team to complete its report, Anwar said the Government wants it urgently.

"There is no point in extending or prolonging the investigation.

"It has to be dealt with as fast as possible. It is already reported. Once reported, I think I should not take it lightly.

"And the Prime Minister said this is a big issue ... we have to deal with it. I would not have known about it if I had not gone to Sabah and read it in the newspapers," he added.

Meanwhile, Bernama reports in Kuala Lumpur that Yong said he has not ruled out the possibility that "offences" were committed in the alleged log smuggling case.

"Obviously I am not ruling out the possibility of offences being committed," he said when asked if there was any misappropriation or corruption involved in the case.

Speaking to reporters after attending the National Council for Local Authorities meeting chaired by Anwar, Yong said he has asked investigators in the case to take into account the possibility of "dereliction of duty and criminality".

Yong said the report he submitted to Dr Mahathir and Anwar contains recommendations on how to rectify the problems.

"All facts are now available to the federal authorities. Let the respective departments and ministries take their own actions to solve the problems," he said.

Yong also said the report should be able to settle the misunderstanding over the issue between Primary Industries Minister Datuk Seri Dr Lim Keng Yaik and Sabah Deputy Chief Minister Datuk Ghapur Salleh who headed the state committee investigating the issue.

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