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Bear the responsibility (HL)

Tony Emmanuel

KUALA LUMPUR, Sat. - To alleviate the Government's burden and ensure accountability, Malaysian companies involved in open burning to clear land in Indonesia have been ordered to bear the costs incurred in fighting fires there.

"With immediate effect, they (the companies) are ordered to take along with them the necessary equipment and money to their respective plantations in Kalimantan and Sumatra and to carry out all necessary measures," Information Minister Datuk Mohamed Rahmat said today.

The order was issued this morning to the National Security Council by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamed, who is also National Operations Director.

"This is to supplement efforts undertaken by the Governments of Malaysia and Indonesia," he said.

Mohamed, who heads the National Disaster Relief Management committee, was speaking to the media after a three-hour meeting with the NSC haze task force at the NSC Ops Centre at the Prime Minister's Department.

Also present were Science, Technology and Environment Minister Datuk Law Hieng Ding and NSC (national security division) director-general Datuk Jaafar Ismail.

Earlier, Mohamed accompanied by Law and other Cabinet members bade farewell to Dr Mahathir at the Sultan Abdul Aziz Shah airport, prior to the Prime Minister's departure for Hong Kong where he addressed the World Bank seminar held there.

Mohamed said the Government had been informed by Indonesia that it had revoked indefinitely the land cultivation licences issued to Indonesian companies (the joint venture partners of Malaysian companies).

When asked if the order (to bear the costs) also included those incurred by the Malaysian Government, Mohamed replied:

"We will start with them (the companies) picking up the expenses incurred in tackling the problem at its source ... Then, we will see about our expenses.

"The Indonesian Government has provided us with a list of 43 Malaysian companies who have signed joint venture agreements with companies there to clear land for cultivation.

"Those involved in clearing land by burning should contact the NSC immediately to facilitate travel arrangements to their respective tracts of land, taking into consideration the closure of airports in several towns in Kalimantan and Sumatra."

He said the companies involved could not plead ignorance any further.

"Either they come forward or the NSC will come after them. We have also been instructed to make public their identities if they fail to heed this order."

When asked how much cost was incurred by the Malaysian Government in tackling the haze problem, Mohamed said:

"We haven't got down to totalling the figures, but nothing comes cheap these days."

Mohamed also announced that France and Japan have offered assistance in helping Malaysia tackle the haze problem.

After briefing the media, Mohamed and Jaafar met senior officials from the Japanese Embassy at the NSC to discuss their offer.

On efforts initiated by the Malaysian Government to tackle the haze

problem at its source, Mohamed said eight Royal Malaysian Air Force aircraft (four C130s and Caribous respectively) would be involved in cloud seeding operations.

"The aircraft are ready, and by midday tomorrow, they will start cloud seeding operations over Negri Sembilan, Johor, Sarawak and the Klang Valley."

The four areas have been identified for the first phase of the operation based on Air Pollutant Index readings.

"The second phase of the operation (the joint operation involving Malaysia and Indonesia) will begin early next week, operating off the Labuan air station.

"Besides this, some 400 firemen will travel over land and sea to reach the affected areas in Kalimantan and Sumatra to tackle the situation."

About 200 firemen, from Sabah and Sarawak, would be deployed to Kalimantan while the remaining firemen will travel from the peninsula to Riau.

(END)