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Cabinet wants all hillslope projects to be reviewed

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KUALA LUMPUR, Mon. - The Cabinet has called for a review of all on-going and planned hillslope development projects involving hill levelling and tree felling to strike a balance between development and environmental conservation.

The Cabinet also decided that government officials who fail to enforce regulations for approving hillslope development, and who fail to ensure the projects comply with the guidelines, would be penalised.

Both decisions, aimed at preventing environmental degradation at such projects were made by the Cabinet last week, Housing and Local Government Minister Datuk Dr Ting Chew Peh said today.

He said the decisions would be enforced with immediate effect and all local authorities had been informed of the decision.

"Local authorities have also been told to stop approving new townships or housing projects on hillslopes until the plans have been carefully scrutinised," he said.

He was speaking to reporters after chairing a briefing and dialogue on physical development for representatives of local authorities, professional bodies and government agencies at the Putra World Trade Centre here.

Ting said the Cabinet made the decision following concerns over indiscriminate tree felling and hill levelling at hillslope development projects.

"The Cabinet wants the contour of hills to be maintained and not levelled and as much of the natural environment preserved.

"Local authorities must now scrutinise any plans concerning hillslope development against the contour of the proposed project site," he said.

To cite an example, Ting said that it was impossible for developers to come out with symmetrical layout plans for a housing estate development when the project site was located on hilly terrain.

"The authorities must view the project site against the plans. If it involves massive tree cutting and hill levelling, it cannot be approved and should be reviewed," he said.

As for on-going hillslope projects, the plans must be reviewed and rectified to minimise hill levelling and tree felling.

"We cannot order a project to be abandoned as the buyer's interest would be at stake. However, remedial measures must be taken to minimise negative impact to the environment," he said.

He, however, could not provide details on the number of hillslope projects which were affected by the Cabinet decision.

Ting said the decision to penalise individuals responsible for approving hillslope projects without proper scrutiny of the plans and failure to monitor the progress was not aimed at victimising anyone.

"It is to instil a sense of responsibility and commitment to the Government's policy on environmental conservation," he said adding the penalties include possible demotion, immediate transfer or suspended promotions.

Ting also said despite the many rules and regulations governing hillslope development, they were not enforced strictly as local authorities were giving excuses such as shortage of manpower.

"We cannot accept lack of manpower as an excuse and we have directed local authorities to use whatever resources available," he said.

He said there were no less than six different laws, including the National Land Code 1965, Land Acquisition Act 1960, Town and Country Planning Act 1976, Building and Drainage Act 1974, Sewerage Services Act 1993 and the Environmental Quality Act 1974, to ensure sustainable and balanced development.

Ting's announcement on the new move comes in the wake of the Ukay Perdana housing project controversy involving developer Projek Ikatan Rapi Sdn Bhd, which is facing legal action for indiscriminate felling of trees and levelling of hills at the project site in Hulu Kelang.

The matter came to light following Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's order to the Ministry to investigate massive land clearing work in Selangor which he spotted from a helicopter in late March.

The announcement is also the latest in a string of guidelines concerning hillslope development.

In 1993, following the Highland Towers' tragedy, the Government suspended approvals for construction of all condominiums and buildings on hillslopes.

Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim said this was to allow an immediate study on the safety of all existing condominiums on hillslopes and those under construction.

He added that the development approval requirements on safety and environmental aspects would also be tightened to prevent a recurrence of the tragedy.

The suspension was later lifted in June the following year.

In January this year, the Department of Environment released guidelines to minimise land degradation in development projects for local authorities to implement as a pre-condition for the issuance of a Development Order.

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