

09/01/1997

Cabinet: Relocate those staying on and along rivers

Esther Tan

KUALA LUMPUR, Wed. - The Cabinet today decided that all those who have built houses on rivers and along the banks would have to be relocated to prevent loss of lives during floods.

Acting Science, Technology and Environment Minister Datuk Abang Abu Bakar Mustapha said today State Governments would have to take the necessary action following the directive since land came under State jurisdiction.

Houses built on rivers have to be pulled down because they are a danger not only to residents but also to the surrounding areas, he said.

He was speaking after signing an agreement on Legal Technical Co-operation with Namibia at his office.

He said the decision was made during a discussion on the Keningau tragedy where more than 190 people were killed and thousands made homeless when the tropical storm Greg hit the district and several other parts of Sabah on Dec 26.

He said no deadline had been set for State Governments to implement the directive.

When suggested that some riverine residents would refuse to be relocated, Abang Abu Bakar said this was because the Keningau tragedy was the country's first such disaster caused by a storm.

He said it was normal for the water level in rivers to rise by a few inches during the high tide.

However, this time around, the river water rose to a very dangerous level, bringing about devastation to the whole area.

"Houses were swept away.

"It is not worth living in a precarious way," said Abang Abu Bakar who is also Minister in the Prime Minister's Department.

Abang Abu Bakar also informed the Cabinet today that the Meteorological Services Department had given early warning to the people about the storm.

The department had written a report on the matter which Abang Abu Bakar submitted to the Cabinet on behalf of Science, Technology and Environment Minister Datuk Law Hieng Ding who is attending an Asean Environment Minister's meeting in Phuket.

"The report states the events that took place from Dec 23 to 24 and the various times the department had issued warnings to the public especially those in Sabah and northern Sarawak," he said.

Asked whether the Cabinet had discussed plans to upgrade the department, he said the Science, Technology and Environment Ministry would have to study the matter and conduct a postmortem of the incident.

"The Ministry will have to look at a sophisticated way of informing the public (about inclement weather)."

Last Saturday, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad had asked State Governments to ensure employers prohibited their workers from building houses along river banks to avoid disasters similar to the one in Keningau.

He said he would discuss the matter with State Governments to make the prohibition effective for the whole country.

He said efforts must be made to provide workers sites away from rivers to build their houses.

Dr Mahathir said the high rate of casualties, particularly in the Keningau district, after tropical storm Greg hit Sabah last week was due

to the existence of houses built on both sides of rivers.

Following this, Housing and Local Government Minister Datuk Dr Ting Chew Peh had directed local authorities to carry out immediate checks on the stability of buildings and houses located along river banks, hill slopes and mining land.

He said if any buildings or houses were found unstable, the local authorities should order the owners to strengthen or reinforce the structures.

In the meantime, he added, occupants in such buildings should be asked to move out until the safety of the buildings had been verified.

On Monday, Pahang State Rural Development and Village Growth Centre chairman Datuk Omar Othman had said the State Government would consider Dr Mahathir's call to ban the construction of buildings along river banks.

He said the Government was concerned about the safety of the residents, especially the Orang Asli, staying along rivers.

He said six of the 10 Orang Asli settlements were located along river banks.

(END)