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Chipping in to fight haze (HL)

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KUALA LUMPUR, Thurs. - To alleviate the Government's financial burden in tackling the haze problem at its source in Indonesia, 43 Malaysian firms with economic interests in the republic are expected to contribute a total of about RM4.5 million to the national disaster fund.

"The contribution will be used to offset expenses already incurred by the Government in tackling the problem so far," a highly placed source said.

This is expected to top the agenda of tomorrow's meeting between representatives of these conglomerates and members of the National Security Council's haze task force at the Prime Minister's Department.

However, at Press time only 29 companies had confirmed that their representatives would be at the meeting.

It was understood the NSC could not contact the 14 other companies.

The decision on the contribution came in the wake of unpredictable haze conditions in the peninsula which forced the closure of Bayan Lepas International Airport in Penang and Langkawi International Airport for several hours.

The Langkawi airport was shut down from noon to 5.15pm, and Penang's from 3.25pm to 6.17pm.

The haze also saw firemen swinging into action by spraying water into the air in the city to reduce dust particles which are compounding the haze.

At 5pm today, the Air Pollutant Index in Kuala Lumpur and Gombak stood at 201, Petaling Jaya (164), Shah Alam (150), Klang (173), Ipoh (162), Malacca (196) and Kuching (528).

Although it could not be immediately ascertained how much the Government had allocated to tackle the problem, the source hinted that figures were running high.

"Nothing comes cheap these days ...," he added.

"We do not expect any objections from the representatives in meeting the requests," the source said, adding that it only amounted to slightly more than RM100,000 each for these conglomerates.

"Considering the fact that these companies have invested heavily in Kalimantan and Sumatra, the Government has taken the initiative to safeguard their investments.

"It would only be natural that these companies come forward and render their assistance especially when it concerns their economic interest," he said.

It is understood that the fund will be managed by the NSC's National Disaster Management and Relief Committee, chaired by Information Minister Datuk Mohamed Rahmat.

The fund was announced by Mohamed last Saturday during a media briefing on the haze and measures implemented by the Government to deal with the problem.

Mohamed and Science, Technology and Environment Minister, Datuk Law Hieng Ding, who was also present at the briefing, kicked off the fund by pledging RM1,000 each.

Speaking to reporters today after launching a campaign to dampen the ground in Bandar Utama in Damansara, Mohamed said the Government had set aside funds to deal with the problem.

"There is no question of (insufficient) money ... this is an emergency."

However, Mohamed could not say the exact amount spent by the Government

to combat the haze as "costs keep increasing".

"We hope to get some contributions not only to fight the fires in Indonesia, but also to enable us to fund research programmes to study the long-term effects the haze would have on the health of Malaysians," he said, adding that local, French and Japanese experts would be employed for the study.

Asked to elaborate on tomorrow's meeting, Mohamed said:

"There are a few matters to be discussed with regards to seeking their co-operation.

"There are also several orders issued which I will convey to these companies."

The orders were issued by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who is also the NSC's National Operations Director.

Last Saturday, Dr Mahathir had instructed Mohamed to inform Malaysian firms with joint venture agreements with Indonesian companies in plantations and other economic interests, and which are believed to be partly responsible for the forest fires raging in the republic, that they are to be held accountable.

Meanwhile, Primary Industries Minister Datuk Seri Dr Lim Keng Yaik called on the public to stop pointing fingers at Malaysian companies about involvement in the forest fires.

"The Malaysian Trade Commission in Jakarta has already stated in its report that three quarters of these Malaysian companies were not even aware of the burning on their land," he said.

He explained this was because some of them (the companies) had engaged Indonesian contractors to clear their land and they used the slash-and-burn method which was a normal agricultural practice there.

In a statement issued by Johor Corporation Bhd, its group chief executive Datuk Mohamed Ali Hashim said there were 19 incidents of fires which engulfed tracts of land in oil palm estates owned by the group.

He said that the fires had begun from outside the estates' perimeters.

The areas razed, involving 410ha covered with tall grass and 300ha of cultivated land located in southern Sumatra, were put out within a day.

In Hong Kong, the World Bank said it was ready to come up with the necessary funding to combat the environmental and health problems now spreading across Southeast Asia due to the fires.

Its president James Wolfensohn said the international agency, whose role is to provide aid for socially-related projects to the world's poor, was ready to offer funds on an emergency basis.

"You (the affected countries) have a terrible situation now, a really tragic situation in the region now with this burning going on and you know if necessary, we're ready to come in with the money," he said at the closing Press conference of the annual International Monetary Fund/ World Bank meeting here. The meeting was officially opened on Tuesday by Chinese Prime Minister Li Peng.

However, Wolfensohn added that money did not appear to be the problem at the moment.

"The problem appears to be a physical problem of firefighters and putting this thing out."

Saying that there was not much that the World Bank could do on this environmental crisis, Wolfensohn however gave an assurance that the institution "is ready to come in in any way on an emergency basis if funding was the problem."

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