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Country put on haze alert (HL)

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KUALA LUMPUR, Mon. - As the Air Pollutant Index hits the highest reading today breaching the hazardous level in Gombak for the first time at 1pm, the National Disaster Action Committee announced that the country has been put on a haze alert.

The committee said the Fire Services and Rescue Department, police and army have been instructed to take action to curb the problem of open burning, including enforcement and prosecution.

It also advised people involved in outdoor activities in areas where the API reading had exceeded the 250 mark, to wear respiratory masks.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, when asked to comment on the haze situation, said it did not warrant a state of emergency to be declared but the Government would continue monitoring it.

"It is not necessary to declare a state of emergency ... not yet."

Dr Mahathir said this after touring the main terminal and satellite buildings at the Kuala Lumpur International Airport in Sepang.

At a meeting at the Prime Minister's Department, the National Disaster Action Committee, headed by Information Minister Datuk Mohamed Rahmat, met director-generals of the various departments involved in tackling problems caused by the haze.

Among those present at the five-hour meeting were National Security Council director-general Datuk Jaffar Ismail and Department of Environment acting director-general Rosnani Ibarahim.

Speaking at a Press conference later, Mohamed said a task force headed by Jaffar, had been set up to formulate steps to tackle the problem.

The eight-member task force comprises representatives from the DOE, Transport, Health, Housing and Local Government ministries, and Meteorological Department, police, armed forces and Fire Services and Rescue Department.

"They will work round-the-clock and a report will be tabled at Wednesday's Cabinet meeting to enable the Government to decide if a state of emergency should be declared," Mohamed said, adding that the task force would closely monitor the situation over the next 48 hours and brief the Cabinet accordingly.

He explained that although the Government had decided that a state of emergency would be declared if API hits the 500 mark, the task force was taking precautionary measures as the situation had reached an alert stage after readings reached very unhealthy and hazardous levels.

At 5pm today, the highest API reading was recorded over Gombak at 298 index-points, followed by Kuala Lumpur (238) and Nilai (264).

The lowest readings were recorded over Jerantut (21), Sungai Petani (68) and Kota Baru (60).

Under the Malaysian Air Pollutant Index, good air quality should have a reading of zero to 50; 51 to 100 (moderate); 101 to 200 (unhealthy); 201 to 300 (very unhealthy) and 300 to 500 (hazardous).

Mohamed said cloud-seeding would continue for as long as necessary.

Besides the ban on open burning, Mohamed said other precautionary measures under consideration include recommending to the Government that factories be directed to reduce emissions, and that earthworks be reduced at development sites to check dust pollution.

On transportation, Mohamed said the task force would recommend that the Government minimise the flow of traffic within the Klang Valley as exhaust

fumes had been identified as a contributing factor to the worsening of air quality.

Mohamed declined to elaborate.

On health, he said the Health Ministry's representatives had indicated that the Jerantut Hospital was prepared to accept patients from hospitals in the city, if the need arose.

Mohamed said the Health Ministry had advised that schools be closed once the API exceeded the 400 mark.

It was reliably learnt the DOE has, since yesterday, began monitoring the API hourly after the air quality worsened over the weekend. Only readings for 8am, 11am and 5pm are announced.

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