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Deadline runs out for our investors

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KUALA LUMPUR, Mon. - The Government has given Malaysian investors, believed to be partly responsible for causing forest fires in Indonesia, until the end of today to own up or face the consequences.

This was decided at today's National Disaster Management and Relief Committee meeting, chaired by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Dr Mahathir said the Malaysian firms involved must accept responsibility.

"We are telling them to contribute to expenses incurred in putting out the fires," he said.

Dr Mahathir, who is director of the National Operations Council, said the companies have to own up and pay.

National Disaster Management and Relief Committee secretary Datuk Jaafar Ismail said the Malaysian companies suspected of causing forest fires in Sumatra and Riau have till the end of today to contact the National Security Division to render assistance to overcome the haze problem.

He said action would be taken against those who fail to contact the division.

Jaafar, however, declined to say what kind of action would be taken.

As at 8pm tonight, only one company had called up to provide information on its activities in Indonesia.

A duty officer said the company's chief executive officer called to give details of its operations in Sumatra. The officer declined to name the company.

The New Straits Times had reported last Friday that the Indonesian Government was investigating 18 companies with Malaysian shareholders on suspicion of having caused forest fires in Sumatra and Riau.

Satellite images revealed hotspots in areas believed to belong to these plantation companies.

The authorities are also investigating 175 other companies believed to have used the slash-and-burn method to clear large tracts of land for plantation activities.

Science, Technology and Environment Minister Datuk Law Hieng Ding said today the Government had already identified most of the Malaysian shareholders of the 18 companies suspected to be responsible for the fires.

This was based on information received from Indonesia and the Primary Industries Ministry. But he declined to reveal the names of the companies.

It is learnt that the list included one or two major plantation companies.

"We tried contacting the companies on Saturday but it was not a working day. To date, only Tabung Haji has come forward."

Law said Tabung Haji officials had informed him that they had put out the fire in their area following a warning from the Indonesian authorities.

The officials had also showed a clearance letter issued by the Indonesian Forestry Ministry.

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