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Delegates told Dr M's absence 'unavoidable'

Zainul Arifin in New York

THE absence of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad from the United Nations special summit on the environment last week is not an indication of Malaysia's waning interest on the issue.

Circumstances prevented Dr Mahathir or his deputy Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim from attending the summit.

It was originally planned that either one would attend the meeting, but the Prime Minister went on leave and Anwar had to be home in his absence.

"The Prime Minister is very much an advocate for the protection of the environment," contended Science, Technology and Environment Minister Datuk Law Hieng Ding. "He had even taken to task those that levelled hills or cleared forests or polluted the environment."

At the week-long special session of the general assembly which ended on Friday, about 60 heads of government and state attended, including leaders of some of the world's major industrialised nations.

Their presence was to lend political weight to the initiatives and programmes to be undertaken.

The summit was to review the progress of the implementation of programmes adopted at the United Nations Conference on the Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro in 1992.

Malaysia, headed by Dr Mahathir, was a participant at the Rio Summit and many had expected him to be here as well.

Some observers at this meeting questioned whether his absence indicated that Malaysia was losing interest in the issue.

"Well, that is just not true," Law said in an interview on Friday. He was here attending the special session.

Earlier, Law reiterated his Ministry's proposal to carry out the macro EIA, a plan to expand the scope of the current environmental impact assessment programme, to study the effects of development on a larger area.

The programme also looks at the ability of a region as a whole to absorb the effects of development. Currently, EIA studies are confined only to the impact of a development within the surrounding area.

For example, Law said a macro EIA could be done for the Klang Valley to determine the area's carrying capacity - the traffic it can hold, houses or buildings that can be built besides the number of industries the area can have without negative environmental impact.

"It is a more holistic approach to the whole EIA process," he said.

The macro EIA, Law said, was almost similar to having a complete physical check-up.

"You might have a problem with your eyesight," he said, "but if you were to check your whole body you might find some other things like diabetes that is causing the problem."

Commenting on reports that many Malaysian companies were exploiting timber in other countries without regard to the environment, Law said these companies were said to have secured concessions in Africa, Latin America and the Pacific Island nations and had logged at will.

"We will not support illegal practices, if there are any," he said. "All Malaysian companies, in whatever trade they may be, have always been told to practise good business ethics and to abide by the laws of the land, including taking care of the environment."

"Our message to companies is very clear, abide by all local laws," he

said.

It was now up to the countries where they do business to punish these businessmen if they break the law, he said.

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