

23 SEP 1997

Mahathir-haze

EVACUATION IN SARAWAK ONLY AS LAST RESORT, SAYS MAHATHIR

KUALA LUMPUR, Sept 23 (Bernama) -- The government will evacuate people from Sarawak only as a last resort, said Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today as the haze in the state worsened, surpassing the 800 mark on the Air Pollutant Index (API).

"It is still one of the options but it is something we have to do as a last resort because there's about one million people to evacuate. It's not so easily done," he said.

Dr Mahathir told reporters this after witnessing an agreement signing by Perusahaan Otomobil Nasional Bhd (Proton), Automobiles Citroen of France and Usahasama Proton-DRB Sdn Bhd to build a new Proton car based on an existing Citroen model.

He said in the event of a mass-evacuation it was also difficult to find a place to relocate the people because the whole of Sarawak and even Sabah were affected by the haze.

"I must say that the level of pollutants in Sarawak has gone up to beyond 700 and that is a very dangerous level. But in order to evacuate, we have to find a place and that is not so easily found.

"So, if we can, we will evacuate, if we cannot, then we will have to ask people to wear masks and things like that and not to participate in outdoor activities and reduce the use of motor vehicles," he said.

Information Minister Datuk Mohamed Rahmat, who is chairman of the National Disaster Management and Relief Committee, said earlier today that mass evacuation may be necessary if the situation worsened.

The API in Kuching today hit 839 at 11am and subsided to 722 at 5 pm, still way above the 301 hazardous level. Sarawak is into the fifth day of a haze emergency.

Dr Mahathir reiterated that the ultimate solution was to help Indonesia put out forest fires there that were causing the haze.

"We can't put out the fire completely but at least we can reduce the amount of fire in Indonesia and reduce the smoke," he said.

A 2,000-member Malaysian contingent, including firemen and support staff, is scheduled to depart tonight for Sumatera and Kalimantan in Indonesia help put out the forest fires.

Meanwhile, the French ambassador to Malaysia Edouard Braine, who was present at the function, said he conveyed to Dr Mahathir today the recommendations of the French government on how to tackle the haze problem.

"I just gave your prime minister some indications about what can be done," he said.

Braine said they were made based on the observations of a French team which spent four days in Malaysia last week in response to a call for help by the Malaysian authorities.

Declining to reveal what was conveyed to Dr Mahathir, Braine said another team from Paris would arrive in the coming days to implement decisions that were being taken.

Braine said whatever course of action would be discussed first with the Indonesian government.

Earlier, in his remarks, Dr Mahathir hoped the joint venture would result in the transfer of technology not confined to Proton-DRB alone but also made available to other local companies and car component vendors.

"Apart from Citroen, we already have collaborations with two Japanese companies producing different sizes of cars and most of these projects have

proven to be profitable," he said.

On a different note, Dr Mahathir said it was unfortunate that in most instances, car manufacturers derived their profit from the government not collecting certain taxes.

"In other words, what constitutes their profit is tax not collected by the government," he said.

Although they were given special treatment, Dr Mahathir said car manufacturers should gain their profit on their own strength.

"Then only we can consider that we have matured as a producer of automobiles," he added. -- BERNAMA

MAM rn