

25/09/1997

Forest fires: Nine more companies explain (HL)

KUALA LUMPUR, Wed. - Nine Malaysian firms with interests in Indonesia have explained to the Government their involvement in the forest fires in Sumatra and Kalimantan which have blanketed the region in choking haze.

National Disaster Management and Relief Committee chairman Datuk Mohamed Rahmat said today they have been asked to send representatives to a meeting on Friday "to enable us to formulate a plan of action to tackle the haze problem".

Also to be discussed, would be "contributions" from the companies concerned to help fight the fires.

"We have to see what role the companies can play," Mohamed said, adding that in a situation such as this, it was not appropriate to point fingers and find scapegoats.

Stressing that the Government was not out to penalise the firms, Mohamed explained that the companies had economic interests in Indonesia.

"As such it is our responsibility to ensure that their interests are not jeopardised in view of the current situation."

As for the remaining 34 companies with interests in Indonesia, Mohamed said the National Security Division would summon them to the meeting.

"We know who they are. And rest assured, the NSD will be contacting them over the next 24 hours," said Mohamed.

The companies which have contacted the NSD are:

EPA Management (a Johor Economic Development Corporation subsidiary), Perak Agricultural Development Authority, Selaseh Pertama (Penang), Johor Education Foundation, Tradewinds (M) Bhd (a subsidiary of Pernas International), Mentiga Plantations, Lumivos Resources Management, Selat Bersatu (all Kuala Lumpur) and Bonggaya Plantations, a joint venture between Tabung Haji and Indonesia's PT Multi Gambut.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad had on Monday asked Malaysian firms, believed to be partly responsible for the fires, to own up and contribute to expenses incurred in putting out the fires.

The companies had been given until midnight on Monday to do so.

In Mersing, Johor Menteri Besar Datuk Abdul Ghani Othman said three State agencies which owned a total of 48,480ha of plantation land in Indonesia, have ascertained that no open burning had been done at their acreage.

Ground teams at the agencies' plantations in the republic had reported that none of the plantations were guilty of burning forests.

He said two plantations owned by Johor Corporation were however found to have been affected by the rapidly spreading forest fires in Sumatra.

Ghani said Johor Education Foundation which owned about 10,000ha of plantation land had reported that it was unaffected by the fires.

He said the agencies had submitted reports to the NSD.

Meanwhile, Science, Technology and Environment Minister Datuk Law Hieng Ding said the Cabinet today approved a proposal to abolish import duty and sales tax on face masks for Sarawak as long as the haze prevailed.

This was due to lack of supply in the State which had been experiencing severe haze for more than a week.

Law said the Cabinet also agreed that the Federal Government donate some 300,000 masks to Sarawak. The masks are expected to cost about RM1 million.

It agreed that all 20,000 masks to be donated by Unicef and 10,000 by

the Japan International Co-operation Agency be distributed to the people of the State.

Other decisions taken by the Cabinet today to combat the haze, were:

\* That the Fire Services and Rescue Department begin spraying water immediately from tall buildings to reduce dust particles in the air;

\* That the department start imposing service charge to douse fires in open burning cases. (This can be imposed under the Treasury Instruction over and above the offender having to face penalties imposed by the Department of Environment);

\* Approved the proposal that Alam Sekitar Malaysia Sdn Bhd set up all the 50 air monitoring stations before the Commonwealth Games in Kuala Lumpur next September; and,

\* Directed the Education Ministry to make contingency plans in case examinations in Sarawak have to be postponed.

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