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Help from other countries sought

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MALAYSIA will seek assistance from other countries to overcome the haze, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said yesterday.

"We will be asking for assistance from some other countries. I cannot reveal the countries yet but I believe France will send some personnel here to try to help out," he told reporters after attending the Universiti Malaya Alumni gathering in Kuala Lumpur yesterday.

Dr Mahathir said the help sought includes equipment to put out forest fires in Indonesia, such as water bombers, planes to carry out cloud-seeding, and water pumps.

The Prime Minister also said he has written to Indonesian Presiden Suharto on the haze situation adding that the Indonesian Government has agreed to allow Malaysia to help fight forest fires in various parts of Sumatra.

Dr Mahathir said the relevant authorities have been instructed to provide equipment and personnel to help prevent forest fires, the main cause of the haze.

On the local front, he said, cloud-seeding will be intensified so that the country will experience more rain. The Royal Malaysian Air Force has been instructed to assist in cloud-seeding.

"RMAF aircraft are being fitted with equipment for cloud-seeding, and they will start soon. I have been told that if Indonesia agrees, the planes can be despatched to the country to help put out the fires there," he said.

Asked whether a directive to evacuate will be issued to the people of Sarawak, where a state of emergency has been declared, Dr Mahathir said: "Where to? Kalimantan and Sabah are equally effected."

He advised them to stay indoors and to wear masks whenever they have to go outdoors.

Of the 18 Malaysian plantation and timber companies which are being investigated by the Indonesian Government for causing forest fires in various parts of Sumatra, Dr Mahathir said: "It is their responsibility to help put out the fire."

He added that action has been taken on open burning "but it seems that the fines imposed have failed to act as a deterrent".

Commenting on suggestions that cloud-seeding has been ineffective and the use of catalytic converters be introduced instead, Dr Mahathir said: "That will take many months before we can fix them. We are faced with an emergency now, and cloud-seeding can be done now. Furthermore, vehicle emissions are not the main cause, but the forest fire is."

Asked whether restrictions will be introduced to discourage vehicles from entering the capital, Dr Mahathir said: "We may have to consider that, but we have not decided yet."

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