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Indonesia gives the green light to send in our firefighters

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KUALA LUMPUR, Fri. - Indonesia has given the green light for Malaysia to send its firemen to fight forest fires in Sumatra, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today.

Speaking to reporters after delivering his inaugural address at the Universiti Malaya's alumni reunion at the main campus in Lembah Pantai, he said, assistance from several countries were also being sought.

"We hope to get equipment to fight fires like water bombers, aeroplanes to carry out cloud seeding, water pumps and others from these countries," he added.

Yesterday, Science, Technology and Environment Minister Datuk Law Hieng Ding told reporters that Dr Mahathir had ordered the department to send its men to Indonesia.

Pending the arrival of the equipment and foreign help, the Royal Malaysian Air Force will carry out cloud seeding operations.

"The RMAF aircraft are being fitted with the equipment for cloud-seeding, and they will start soon. I have even told them that if Indonesia agrees, the aeroplanes can be dispatched there," said Dr Mahathir.

He also said that he had sent a letter to President Suharto on the current haze situation. He did not disclose the contents.

Asked if an evacuation was necessary for Sarawak, Dr Mahathir replied:

"Where to? Kalimantan and Sabah are equally effected. What should be done is to stay indoor and wear masks."

On criticism that cloud-seeding operations were ineffective and the Government should consider making it compulsory for vehicles to be fitted with catalytic converters to curb air pollution, the Prime Minister said:

"That will take months to fix ... we are faced with an emergency, and cloud-seeding can be carried out now.

"Moreover, vehicular exhaust emissions are not the main cause of the haze but the burning of forests."

On open burning, Dr Mahathir said action was being taken but the fines were not a deterrent.

Meanwhile, Housing and Local Government Minister Datuk Dr Ting Chew Peh said eight teams of firefighters, comprising 10 men each, were on standby for deployment in Indonesia.

"Thirty of them are from Sarawak and the rest from Sabah," he said after chairing a meeting of senior officials of the department to discuss Dr Mahathir's directive to send fire fighters to Indonesia.

Ting added that they were selected as they were trained to fight forest fires in the two states.

He also said RM1.5 million worth of fire fighting equipment was ordered from a Canadian company, via the National Security Council, for the team going to Indonesia.

The company will despatch an expert to train the men in using the new equipment like mobile fire and water pumps and water tanks.

Ting appealed to private companies especially dealing with fire fighting equipment to sell, lend or donate the equipment to the department.

Those who wanted to assist the department were advised to contact the nearest fire stations for more information.

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