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Indonesia to go after bush fire culprits

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KUALA LUMPUR, Mon. - The Indonesian Government has directed all its district and forest authorities in Sumatra, Riau and Kalimantan to act sternly against those causing bush fires.

Science, Technology and Environment Minister Datuk Law Hieng Ding said he was told by Indonesian Environment Minister Sarwono Kusumaatmadya that a directive had been issued to these authorities to step up enforcement in the affected areas because of the severe haze the fires were causing in the region.

"Both of us have agreed to keep in touch with each other constantly, either by telephone or fax.

"This is to enable us to keep each other informed about the haze and weather condition in both countries," he told reporters after launching the National Seminar on Ozone Depleting Substances.

The five-day seminar is organised by the Department of Environment in conjunction with the ODS Networking in Southeast Asia Pacific 1997 Meeting.

Law said Sarwono had informed him recently that some 9,000 hectares of forest had been destroyed by fire to date.

He was also told that the current haze could be worse and could last longer than the one in 1994 when 100,000ha of forest were destroyed.

"According to forecasts, the dry spell in Indonesia will be longer this time," said Law. The Indonesian Government had also invited Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei to attend a two-day meeting to discuss the transboundary problem from Aug 11.

Law said Malaysia would make several proposals at the meeting including sharing the costs of putting out the fires, setting up a joint monitoring committee and conducting a joint study or engaging a team to study the problem.

Law said one possible measure was to hire a plane to put out the fires as suggested by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

"But we need to have an understanding with Indonesia first to allow the planes to cross the international border.

"We are concerned about the matter not only because of its effects on public health but also on next year's Commonwealth Games," he said.

Asked what had happened to the action plan drawn up at the 1995 Asean Meeting on Transboundary Pollution, Law said the committee had only met once and there was no concrete proposal.

"We hope to bring it up again at this month's meeting," he said.

On the local contributing factors to the deterioration of the air quality, Law said he had directed all the State DOEs to set up committees to monitor the haze and carry out enforcement.

The committees should be chaired by Menteri Besar or Chief Ministers and represented by State Exco members on environment, and officials from relevant agencies including the Road Transport Department, Fire Services and Rescue Department and Forestry Department. "These committees can help look out for open burning," he said.

Law said due to yesterday's rain, today's air quality reading had improved slightly in all areas except Klang and Seberang Prai.

The air quality in Klang and Seberang Prai reached unhealthy levels with Malaysian Air Quality Index readings of 115 and 101 respectively.

Except for Jerantut, which is categorised as good, the air quality in

other areas is within the moderate level.

The air quality reading for Kuala Lumpur, Petaling and Ipoh is 80; Gombak and Malacca 90; Kajang 72; Shah Alam and Kuching 88; Sungai Petani 81; Nilai 83; Johor Baru 78; Kuantan 59; Kota Baru 74, and Kemaman 71.

Law said visibility levels at Bayan Lepas, Butterworth, Miri, Kuching and Sibu were between one and two kilometres.

In the Klang Valley, it was between three and five kilometres while in the east coast areas, it was three to eight kilometres.

Latest satellite imageries continue to show hot spots over cloud-free areas of Central Sumatra and an isolated hot spot near the coastal area of Selangor.

Law said the Meteorological Services Department could not identify the cause of the hot spot in Selangor.

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