

28 SEP 1997

French-Fire

INDONESIAN FOREST FIRES CAN BE FOUGHT, SAYS THE FRENCH

KUALA LUMPUR, Sept 28 (Bernama) -- A French fire expert said it is not impossible to fight the forest fires in Indonesia provided firefighters know the proper procedure to face them.

Lt Col Charly Bastaroli, who heads a French team to provide technical advice to their Malaysian counterparts, said a forest fire was fought in function of the terrain and firemen should be able to make their moves in front of it.

Some 2,000 Malaysian firefighters are now in Indonesia to help put out the fires burning large tracts of forests and plantation fields there which are contributing to the haze currently blanketing several countries in the region like Malaysia, Brunei, Singapore and also parts of Indonesia itself.

However, Bastaroli admitted that it was difficult for him to say how long it would take to control or put out the fire since the team had not visited the areas concerned.

Speaking to reporters at a demonstration on the usage of fire-fighting equipment here, he said if the fires became too big, then the immediate concern of the firemen should be to protect lives and properties by diverting the fires to a place where it could be somewhat contained.

Bastaroli said the team, which is here at the request of the Malaysian government, would impart their knowledge in fire-fighting procedures using helicopters to local firemen.

When asked why the team was here instead of Indonesia, he said there had been no request from the Indonesian government asking for French help to combat the fires.

"France has a firefighting cooperation agreement with Malaysia whereas we do not have that with Indonesia," he said.

Bastaroli said Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad visited his unit during the prime minister's visit to France last year. The unit comes under the jurisdiction of the French Home Ministry.

He said the Indonesian fires were huge compared to the ones experienced by the team before.

"For example the recent forest fires in Marseille involved only 5,000 hectares...for us it was already considerable and here, it's huge," he said, adding that fires in the island of Reunion in 1992 destroyed about 7,000 hectares of land with a similar kind of vegetation found in the burning Indonesian regions.

He said it was possible that heavy rains could help diminish the fires on the surface of the ground but it would take a long time to put out the underground peat fires. -- BERNAMA

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