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KL offers aid to put out Indon forest fires (HL)

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KUALA LUMPUR, Wed. - Malaysia is prepared to provide financial support for water-bombing operations in Indonesia against forest fires which have been identified as the cause of the current haze enveloping the country, resulting in air quality deteriorating to hazardous levels.

Science, Technology and Environment Minister Datuk Law Hieng Ding said today Malaysia was prepared to share, along with Singapore and Indonesia, the cost of the operations for three to four months after the water-bombers had been delivered.

Indonesia did not indicate how many of the planes it would hire or buy from Canadian company Bombardier.

But Law described Indonesian officials as being "very positive" in the move to use the water bombers and that Bombardier could deliver the aircraft within one month. The monthly cost of operations is expected to be about US\$400,000 (RM1.1 million) for two aircraft.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad had last month suggested the hiring of water bombers as a precautionary measure during dry spells.

Dr Mahathir had also suggested asking for expert help from other countries such as the US and Canada.

The Bombardier water bomber can scoop up over 6,000 litres of water in 12 seconds while skimming at high speed over any suitable body of water. This technique enables it to make repeated heavy attacks, with foam suppressant added to its load, directly on a field without returning to an airfield.

Once airborne, it can reach speeds of 300km per hour and in an average mission of 11km distance from water to fire can complete nine drops within an hour, delivering more than 50,000 litres of fire suppressant.

The use of water-bombers was one of several measures discussed at the Asean Senior Officers on Environment Task Force meeting on trans-boundary haze pollution in Jakarta on Monday.

Law said Indonesia had agreed to consider the use of water-bombers for fire suppression and to further strengthen enforcement against illegal ground and forest fires.

He said Information Minister Datuk Mohamed Rahmat, who is chairman of the National Disaster Committee, will go to Indonesia to follow up on the discussions and look into long-term solutions.

Law said the National Haze Committee which met here on Monday had included a proposal for the setting up of volunteer fire-fighting teams.

"We are working with the local authorities and the Fire Services and Rescue Department on the matter."

He said hotlines would be set up both at the district and federal levels for reporting of illegal burning.

Law said condition of the haze in Butterworth and Penang deteriorated from moderate yesterday to severe today. The condition also deteriorated in the Klang Valley and Perak today.

The haze has also affected Kuantan, Mersing and Kota Baru, areas which were previously unaffected.

Visibility in Penang and Butterworth dropped to between one and two kilometres today. In Perak and Selangor, it is between four and six kilometres.

Law said the condition in Sarawak continued to deteriorate, with Kuching, Miri and Sibul experiencing moderate haze. However, in Sabah, only

a slight haze was reported over Kota Kinabalu and Tawau.
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