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Landowners taking States to court

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KOTA KINABALU, Sat. - The misuse of power by some State Governments when acquiring land from the people for development is rampant and several landowners have gone to court to seek redress.

Land and Co-operative Development Minister Datuk Osu Sukam said the Federal Government was aware of the matter and had amended the Land Acquisition Act to prevent it.

He said the amended Act, which had been passed by Parliament, would be enforced nationwide once the Yang di-Pertuan Agong assented to it. The royal assent is expected in June.

The amendments meanwhile bar State Governments from acquiring and selling land for a profit.

Osu said the Federal Government had recently made it easy for State Governments to acquire land for development purposes.

"But some State Governments had not followed the procedures resulting in affected landowners going to court seeking redress for allegedly being short-changed in payment of compensation," he said.

Speaking to reporters after accompanying the Yang di-Pertua Negeri Tun Sakaran Dandai to the New Straits Times photo exhibition on "Umno's 50-year struggle" at Wisma Muis in Sembulan, Osu said: "We are waiting for the amendment to be gazetted."

Yesterday Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad had said that some State Governments had taken actions which were "out of line" with that of the Federal Government over acquisition of the people's land.

Osu said once enforced, the Act would give a guideline to State Governments on land acquisition."

He said, among others, the Act would give landowners the opportunity to develop their land on their own or on a joint venture basis with the private sector.

"Only when the landowners cannot develop their land can the Government acquire it and pay compensation based on market price," he said.

Meanwhile, Osu said that the Federal Government would terminate the contracts awarded for the multi-million ringgit turfing project along the Beaufort-Sipitang and Beaufort-Mesapol roads.

He said this was because no work had been carried out on the more than RM200 million project which was awarded on a negotiated tender basis last December to several local companies.

"I visited the roads yesterday and there was no visible development...the contractors obviously had not done anything for the last six months," he said.

Asked to name the contractors concerned, Osu said he would not disclose them yet but promised to do so in two months' time if the contractors could not give him a satisfactory explanation for the delay.

"I have directed the Federal Development Department to haul up the contractors and demand to check their work schedules for the last six months," he said.

Osu said the people in Beaufort, Sipitang and Mesapol were blaming the Barisan Nasional Government for not fulfilling promises to upgrade the roads when the culprits were the contractors.

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