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Lojing report 'baseless', says Halim

Manisah Ismail

KOTA BARU, Wed. - The State Government today described as baseless reports on the severe environmental degradation in the Lojing Highlands due to indiscriminate clearing and excessive logging.

Kelantan Deputy Menteri Besar Abdul Halim Abdul Rahman said the reports, which appeared in the New Straits Times on Tuesday, were not true.

"The picture which appeared on the front page of the newspaper was not taken at the Lojing Highlands, but at a pick-up point about 60km from Lojing," he added.

However, he declined further comment saying that he would clarify the matter after receiving reports from the relevant departments.

"We have received the report from the Forestry Department and are waiting for the Department of Environment and the State Land and Mines Department to submit theirs.

"I will be able to provide details on the real situation in Lojing after getting the reports from all the departments which will be in about a day or two," he told reporters at Kota Darulnaim.

He had earlier attended the ceremony to present the appointment letter to Kelaboran Assemblyman Nordin Yaakob as the new Kota Baru Municipal Council president by Menteri Besar Datuk Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat.

Asked whether the State Government had issued permits for development projects to be carried out at the Lojing Highlands, Abdul Halim said there were a few permits issued.

Expressing regret over the reports, he said the State Government would look into the possibility of taking legal action.

Yesterday, the Menteri Besar's Press secretary Wan Ismail Wan Jusoh had said that the State Government had issued permits to several companies to carry out development projects in the Lojing Highlands.

They included a highland resort which would be carried out on a joint-venture basis between the State Economic Development Corporation and a private company.

Wan Ismail also said that the State Government should not be blamed if the projects carried out caused environmental degradation.

"The State Government only gives approval to the companies and it is the latter which should obtain approval for the Environmental Impact Assessment from the DOE before carrying out their projects.

"If environmental pollution and degradation were to occur, it is the responsibility of the DOE to take the necessary action against the companies concerned."

According to Nik Aziz's political secretary Husam Musa, only three logging permits were issued by the State Government this year.

He said the permits were issued only for areas meant for development.

It is learnt that a committee on illegal logging would be set up by the State Government to monitor forestry activities especially in the highland areas.

However, a source in the State Government said a proposal for the setting up of the committee had yet to be tabled at the State Exco-level for approval.

When asked, Nik Aziz said the the Lojing Highlands' issue was being highlighted to divert the people's attention from the real problems facing the Federal Government.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad had highlighted the

environmental degradation in the highlands three years ago with the Cabinet calling on the Kelantan Government in May last year and again last month to act decisively to overcome the problem.

Science, Technology and Environment Minister Datuk Law Hieng Ding had said last month that the Cabinet had ordered the Department of Environment to brief Kelantan State Executive Councillors on the extent of environmental damage in the highlands.

Nik Aziz, responding to the Cabinet's concern, said the State Government had never issued permits for logging activities in the highlands.

However, a New Straits Times team which visited the highlands last week with the aid of Orang Asli guides, found logging and land clearing activities being carried out.

The DOE said that as many as 55 development and logging projects, covering 135,000ha was being carried out in the area.

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