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Malaysia to send team to help fight Indon forest fires

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MALAYSIA and Indonesia, which have agreed on a joint exercise to counter the haze problem, will make Kuching airport their base for cloud-seeding operations.

Malaysia will also send a team comprising members of the Special Malaysian Assistance Rescue Team and the Fire and Rescue Services Department to Indonesia to help put out forest fires that have been identified as the main cause of the haze. It is believed that some 2,000 personnel will be involved.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said the team will bring with them equipment to draw underground water in Kalimantan.

"We have agreed with the Indonesian authorities that the Kuching airport be used as the base for cloud-seeding operations," he said.

More aircraft will be used for the exercise in the country as well as to assist Indonesia, Dr Mahathir said after chairing the the Disaster Management and Relief Committee meeting in Kuala Lumpur yesterday. Currently, eight aircraft have been deployed.

Malaysia and Indonesia can expect several other countries to offer assistance.

Dr Mahathir said the French researchers, who were in the country to conduct a study on the haze, returned to France yesterday and will be proposing some form of assistance to Malaysia.

Assistance had also been sought from Japan which had offered jet-shooters for the fire-fighting operation.

Dr Mahathir said the committee found that the haze, which had worsened and resulted in a state of haze emergency being declared in Sarawak, is expected to persist at least until May next year.

In view of this, he advised the public to take necessary precautions to protect their health.

Dr Mahathir also said that kindergartens will be closed if the Air Pollutant Index (API) reaches 300 and all schools will be closed should the API hit 400. Meanwhile, outdoor activities should be reduced.

The committee, which met at the Prime Minister's Department, also advised the public to postpone all outdoor functions and celebrations.

Factories, he said, should stop waste incineration and other activities which might add to the haze problem.

The advice came as the API in Kuching, where the state of emergency has been in force since Friday, touched 714 at 8.00pm yesterday. Efforts to create rain since last Saturday afternoon have not had much impact.

Elsewhere in the country, the API in the afternoon in Nilai was 306 while in Gombak it was 301. Kuala Lumpur had a reading of 233 while Petaling Jaya had 230.

On Malaysian investors allegedly involved in forest-burning, Dr Mahathir said the companies should shoulder part of the fire-fighting responsibility.

"We are telling them to contribute either in kind or in cash. This is their responsibility although it is in Indonesia. If they don't do something, we will take whatever action we can against them," he said.

He also suggested that the public can help to ease the problem by car-pooling and using public transport more. As to whether the Government will review existing laws on pollution control, he said: "We are studying the matter."

Among the aspects being considered is the quantum of fine since the existing penalties do not seem to be effective in deterring the offenders, he added.

"We have fines that were fixed 30 or 50 years ago when the people's income were very low. Now, they (offenders) can easily pay RM10,000 or RM20,000 in fines," he said.

Meanwhile, National Security Division Director-General Datuk Jaafar Ismail has requested Malaysian companies involved in the clearing of forests in Kalimantan and Sumatra to contact the division (tel 03-2936862 or 03-2389929).

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