

22 SEP 1997

Mahathir-Haze

MALAYSIAN FIRE-FIGHTING TEAM TO LEAVE FOR INDONESIA

KUALA LUMPUR, Sept 22 (Bernama) -- Malaysia will send a team comprising members of the Special Malaysian Assistance Rescue Team (Smart) and Fire and Rescue Services Department personnel to Indonesia to help put out its forest fires, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today.

He said that the team would bring with them equipment to draw water from underground wells as some areas in Kalimantan were experiencing drought, in the fire-fighting operation.

This would be another effort by Malaysia besides its assistance to help Indonesia in its cloud-seeding exercise in tackling the haze problem, he told a news conference after chairing a meeting of the Disaster Management and Relief Committee at the Prime Minister's Department.

Dr Mahathir, who is director of the National Operation Council, said that the committee studied the overall haze situation which had worsened, leading to a state of haze emergency being declared in Sarawak.

He said that the state of haze emergency in Sarawak was still in force because of the very high level of air pollution in the state. The air quality in Sarawak was recorded at "hazardous" level with an air pollutant index (API) reading of 569 compared with an API reading of 473 at 1am.

"We have agreed with the Indonesian authorities that the Kuching airport be used as the base in the cloud-seeding exercise," he said at the news conference also attended by Information Minister Datuk Mohamed Rahmat who is the chairman of the committee.

The Prime Minister said that more aircraft would be used in addition to the existing eight in the cloud-seeding exercise in the country and the same aircraft would be used to assist Indonesia in its cloud-seeding exercise.

Dr Mahathir said that the French researchers sent here to study the haze situation in the country returned to France yesterday to draw up a form of assistance to be provided to Malaysia to tackle the haze problem.

He said that assistance had also been sought from Japan which had offered "jet-shooters" for the fire-fighting operation.

"We realise the problem cannot be overcome easily but we will try our best," he said while showing a meteorological satellite picture to reporters.

Dr Mahathir also suggested several measures that could be taken by the public during the haze.

He said that besides using masks, the public should minimise the use of private vehicles in efforts to reduce smoke emission.

The public should instead car-pool or use public transport, he said.

Dr Mahathir also said that the committee agreed that kindergartens be closed when the air pollutant index reading reaches 300.

Besides the closure of schools in the event that the API reading reaches 400, he said that outdoor activities should also be reduced to prevent too much exposure to the haze.

All celebrations to mark events or anniversaries should be postponed, he said.

Dr Mahathir also made another appeal to factories to stop the burning of wastes to help overcome the problem.

He also said that Malaysian companies said to have been involved in the burning of forest debris in Kalimantan should be shoulder part of the fire-fighting responsibility.

"We are telling them to contribute either in kind or in the form of money. This is their responsibility eventhough it is in Indonesuia. We will make sure that if they don't do something, whatever action we can take against them, we will take," he said.

Asked whether stricter laws should be imposed as a result of the haze problem, Dr Mahathir said: "We are making a study on the matter."

He said that among the aspects under study was the quantum of the fine to be imposed since the existing penalty was not effective to deter offenders.

"We sometimes have fines fixed 30 years or 50 years ago when the cost of living was low and the people's income was very low. But now, for them (offenders), RM10,000, RM20,000 could be easily paid without any problem," 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).

"I would like to receive their call today. If they do not contact us, then we are taking action," he said. -- BERNAMA

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