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Ministers to become tree-growers (HL)

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KUALA LUMPUR, Wed. - Ministers will lead by example and turn tree-growers in a move to give the national greening campaign a boost.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who gave the order at the weekly Cabinet meeting today, wanted every Malaysian to plant a tree or two annually in their compounds or elsewhere.

Science, Technology and Environment Minister Datuk Law Hieng Ding said after his ministry's post-Cabinet meeting that Dr Mahathir also wanted all government agencies and State Governments to be told about the importance of having more trees.

In the spirit of the campaign, Works Minister Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu also pledged that 72 trees along one stretch of the RM1.2 billion highway from the city centre to Putrajaya and the Kuala Lumpur International Airport in Sepang would not be destroyed but replanted in other parts of the city.

Law said Dr Mahathir spoke at length about the importance of conserving and planting trees during the Cabinet meeting.

"He took a serious view of the matter and felt that trees should not be cut unnecessarily," Law said.

"Dr Mahathir said the Cabinet members should take the lead in this. It is leadership by example."

In the case of decorative plants, the Prime Minister said more research should be conducted on ways to make them flower faster.

"Instead of just tissue-culture, it was felt that studies should also be conducted more on how to perpetuate tree growth.

"We should also look at growing more colourful and beautiful trees. This is in line with the greening of the country campaign," he said.

Law said the Science, Technology and Environment Ministry would co-ordinate the research and development activities while the Forest Research Institute of Malaysia was expected to be the main agency.

He said the ministry would utilise its existing funds to finance the R&D activities.

On Monday, Dr Mahathir launched the national tree-planting campaign jointly organised by the Housing and Local Government Ministry and local authorities.

The Government hopes to plant three million trees by the year 2000 and 20 million trees by 2020.

The campaign seeks to combine present efforts to make Malaysia a "Garden Nation" with other tree-planting programmes such as the one managed by the Malaysian Nature Society.

When launching the campaign, Dr Mahathir had urged all local authorities to make landscaping mandatory in all development projects.

He also urged them to take landscaping seriously and come up with the necessary legislation.

State and local authorities were also asked to have reserve land for landscaping purposes on roadsides. People owning vacant land near roads and rivers were urged to plant trees on it.

Samy Vellu's pledge on the 72 trees was made after he announced that the Cabinet had approved the proposed revised routes for the RM1.2 billion dedicated highway which would provide a direct link between Kuala Lumpur and new administration centre in Putrajaya and the Kuala Lumpur International Airport in Sepang.

Speaking to reporters after his ministry's post-Cabinet briefing, he said originally the consortium of companies undertaking the project, Konsortium Lapangan Terjaya Sdn Bhd, had proposed that the link to the dedicated highway should connect Kampung Pandan to Putrajaya and Sepang.

"But the Cabinet decided that the dedicated highway should include Jalan Tun Razak, Kampung Pandan, Jalan Cheras, Jalan Kuchai Lama, Salak South and Bukit Jalil," he said.

Samy Vellu said the Malaysian Highway Authority and the project consultants identified 72 trees that would have to make way for the project to take place.

"My Ministry then consulted the Forest Research Institute of Malaysia which assured us that the trees could be replanted."

He said the Cabinet also decided that the consortium undertaking the project must maintain the 72 trees even after they were replanted in other areas.

He said the replanting process would take about three months as the consortium would have to identify areas where the trees could be replanted.

Samy Vellu said the dedicated highway would limit interchanges within Kuala Lumpur, Putrajaya and the new airport reducing the risk of traffic delays and providing guaranteed journey times between the three centres.

He said the Cabinet decided that consortium should start work within six months from now and the project should be completed within 30 months.

In a related development, Housing and Local Government Minister Datuk Ting Chew Peh said his ministry would issue directives to State governments, local authorities and government agencies prohibiting them from felling trees indiscriminately.

He said the Government decided the directive was necessary as there were a number of local government authorities and agencies such as the Public Works Department which felled trees while carrying out their operations.

"Under the Town and Country Planning Act 1976, these authorities and agencies are only allowed to relocate trees and not fell them," he told reporters at his Ministry after the weekly post-cabinet meeting.

Furthermore, he said since the Government has launched a national greening campaign, all Government bodies should show a good example by not cutting down trees.

When asked what action would be taken against agencies which continued to fell trees after receiving the directives, Ting said appropriate action would be taken against those responsible although the matter was not discussed during the Cabinet meeting.

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