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Ministry may use small rockets to seed clouds

KUALA LUMPUR, Wed. - Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today asked the Science, Technology and Environment Ministry to look into the possibility of using small rocket-like gadgets for cloud-seeding in future.

Science, Technology and Environment Minister Datuk Law Hieng Ding said today this could overcome the problem of getting pilots to fly aircraft for cloud-seeding.

"Pilots do not like flying into clouds because of turbulence," he told reporters after today's Cabinet meeting.

Law said the Prime Minister felt this was possible as there exists technology for rocket constructions in countries like Russia, Japan, and India.

"We are looking at rocket-like gadgets which could be launched from the ground into the clouds. These gadgets would then explode to spray the droplets of water into the clouds," he said.

He said the rockets should be big enough to carry about 1,000 kilogrammes of water.

Yesterday, Law had said cloud-seeding to induce rain would be carried out in the Klang Valley from Monday to counter the effects of the dry weather on the haze problem.

This is the first time cloud-seeding is being used to induce rain to clear suspended particles in the air during the haze period.

The Meteorological Services Department has hired a twin-engine skyvan from Pan Malaysian Air Transport Sdn Bhd for the purpose. The department uses the company's services to create rain for the Pedu and Muda water catchment areas between October and November annually.

Initially, the company had signed a contract with Juru Ukur Perunding to carry out survey works for LGB Engineering Sdn Bhd this month.

However, Law said the three companies had agreed to re-schedule the work to enable the Meteorological Services Department to use the aircraft.

Law said today work to install the cloud-seeding equipment onto the aircraft began on Monday and it would go on until Sunday.

Asked if cloud-seeding would be conducted for Kuching as air quality in the area reached a unhealthy level of 104 on the Air Pollutant Index again today, he said there were no more aircraft available.

"If the situation warrants it, we will try talking to the aircraft company again," he said.

Law said Dr Mahathir also today mentioned an article in the Aug 18 issue of Aviation Week and Space Technology magazine on France's use of space imaging for its efforts to monitor and prevent summertime forest fires.

The Prime Minister suggested Malaysia use satellite images to monitor the haze in the entire region.

Law said Malaysia would be able to receive immediate satellite data under a project to construct a ground station for remote sensing next year.

The ground station, approved by the Cabinet in April, will be built in Temerloh, Pahang, where frequency disturbances for transmission will be minimal. The station, to cost about RM70 million, will enable Malaysia to receive data from satellites orbiting with a 2,000-kilometre radius.

The satellite data can be used to monitor illegal logging, environmental pollution, entry of illegal immigrants and smuggling activities, among

others.

At present, Malaysia spends about RM4 million annually to buy mapping data on its land use patterns and management of natural resources from Thailand, Indonesia, the United States and Europe.

"However, securing satellite images from them depends on the availability of a time slot for us. Furthermore, we need to develop the images ourselves," said Law.

For instance, data from the US and Europe are usually delayed between three and six months.

With the ground station, Malaysia will be able to receive the images from Spot satellite (France-owned), Radarsat (Canada), IRS-1C (India) and NOAA and Landsat from the US for immediate processing.

Law said the ministry had invited seven private companies from the United States, Canada, Italy, Japan and France to bid for the RM70 million project.

However, only three had responded. These proposals are currently being assessed by a technical and construction committee.

The ministry will then submit the proposals to the Finance Ministry for approval.

Meanwhile, Meteorological Services Department's weather modification director Tung Nam Ping said next week's cloud-seeding would induce showers lasting only between 30 minutes and an hour.

"We do not expect a downpour like in Pedu and Muda catchment areas because the clouds are expected to be dry here. This is due to the south-westerly monsoon," he said.

The south-westerly wind which is blows from Indonesia towards west of the Peninsula is dry.

Cloud-seeding in Pedu and Muda usually brings about a downpour because it is done during the north-eastern monsoon which is during October and November. This is the time when moisture content in clouds is higher.

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