

23/09/1997

Ministry to monitor supply of food items

Kang Siew Li

THE Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs Ministry will begin monitoring the supply of essential food items in the country to prevent unscrupulous traders from raising prices of goods in view of the current haze situation.

Its Minister Datuk Seri Megat Junid Megat Ayob reminded traders to be responsible and not take the opportunity to increase prices of their commodities.

Speaking to reporters after opening the half-day Antwerp Diamond Conference in Kuala Lumpur yesterday, he said: "So far, we have not received any report about traders hoarding their goods to create a false sense of insufficiency.

"I think the traders and retailers have been acting in a responsible way. At this moment, the prices of food items are still controllable."

However, Megat Junid said the ministry is concerned about a sudden lack of chickens in the market due to the haze problem, which may cause the price of chickens to rise.

"That's why we have to make sure that there is no shortage (of food items). Because if there were no shortages, there would be any reason why people should raise their prices," he said.

On the price of fish in Kuching, which has been reported to be escalating of late, Megat Junid urged the people to "consume other alternative food items which are much more affordable".

Meanwhile, on yesterday's National Security Council's haze task force meeting, which was chaired by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, Megat Junid said:

"We agreed that proactive action must be taken to tackle the haze problem. We shouldn't take a passive attitude.

"The most important thing is that we have to help the Indonesian authorities in all forms to stop the open burning in Indonesian forests," he added.

Megat Junid also explained that the face masks, which were believed to protect people against the haze, could offer no protection from fine haze particles.

"Hospital experts have said that the ordinary face masks are not enough to alleviate haze-related health problems. Only the sophisticated kinds which are more expensive are effective in this sense," he added.

On differing prices of face masks sold these days, Megat Junid said: "We can only persuade the traders to price their masks reasonably because this is not a controlled item."

Earlier, in his speech, Megat Junid said protection of consumers who purchase diamonds is something the Malaysian diamond industry may have to look into.

"In this respect, the Belgian experience of having bourses and diamond certificates can be studied in more detail."

He said although Malaysia may not yet be ready for trading diamonds in a bourse, "it certainly is possible to introduce the system of diamond certificates".

"This system will ensure that the quality of every diamond purchased is guaranteed," he added.

He also commended Belgium, which has a number of diamond schools and special training programmes that are the best in the world.

"Malaysia would be most happy if facilities in these schools and places in the special training programmes could be made available directly or through the existing diamond factories in Malaysia," he said.

He added that there are currently three diamond processing factories in Ipoh, Arau and Kota Baru.

Megat Junid said he hoped that the Diamond High Council of Belgium could explore having special arrangements with the Mara school of craft and design or cooperation with the Malaysian Handicraft Development Authority.

"The local players should pursue this matter to increase the pool of local craftsmen in diamond cutting and polishing," he said.

For the period January to June last year, the exports of "rough diamonds" from Malaysia were 194,000 carats valued at US\$37.76 million (US\$1 = RM3.10), compared with exports of US\$38.68 million in the previous year.

(END)