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More checks on project sites to protect environment

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KUALA LUMPUR, Wed. - Concerned with the continuing indiscriminate felling of trees and levelling of hills, the Cabinet today directed State Governments and local authorities to step up checks on development projects to ensure regulations are strictly followed.

The Cabinet, at its meeting today, expressed concern that there were still reports of developers flouting guidelines and regulations on cutting trees and levelling of hills in the name of development.

Housing and Local Government Minister Datuk Dr Ting Chew Peh said the relevant authorities such as the Town and Country Planning Department must step up enforcement and carry out surprise checks to ensure the developers complied with the requirements.

He said the public should also come forward to provide information to the authorities if they were aware of developers who flouted the regulations.

"The Government's position is firm ... felling of trees and levelling of hills cannot be carried out indiscriminately. It should be kept to a minimum.

"Some developers prefer to cut the trees down so as not to incur additional cost for replanting," he told reporters before chairing his ministry's post-Cabinet meeting.

Ting said, the local authorities required developers to transplant a tree having a circumference measuring 0.8 metres if it has to make way for development.

He said errant developers could be charged under the Town and Country Planning Act if they felled trees indiscriminately as the law provides for a fine of up to RM50,000 for felling a tree.

"We want the developer to co-operate. The Government will take them to court if they do not," he said, adding that it was necessary to incur extra cost to protect the environment.

Ting said the Housing and Local Government Ministry was investigating the massive land clearing works in Selangor as directed by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Dr Mahathir spotted the activities while on the flight back to Kuala Lumpur from a visit to Taman Negara last week.

Ting said the enforcement officers from the Town and Country Planning Department has identified several possible sites which Dr Mahathir saw from the aircraft.

He said action would be taken against the developer of the project if there was evidence that he had failed to observe regulations for clearing the land.

The ministry would hand over a report of the investigation to the Cabinet.

"We have some indication of the possible site (spotted by Dr Mahathir). The Prime Minister saw one hill which is bald."

Asked whether it was possible for enforcement officers to conduct frequent checks on the projects, Ting said it was impossible for the enforcement officers to check the projects daily.

The public, especially those staying near the projects, could help by informing the authorities if they came across such activities.

On a suggestion that the Government's effort to get the developers to comply with the guidelines and regulations was not succeeding, Ting said

the number of those involved was decreasing.

He said, however, there was now better understanding among the developers and people of the need to protect the environment.

"The (environment) laws are there but there are those who are still stubborn."

Ting said developers were required to outline comprehensive details of their projects to minimise environmental degradation after amendments were made to the Town and Country Planning Act two years ago.

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