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Ghapur-Logs

MTIB AWARE INDONESIAN TIMBER ENTERING SABAH, SAYS GHAPUR

KOTA KINABALU, Jan 27 (Bernama) -- The Malaysian Timber Industry Board (MTIB) was aware of timber from Indonesia entering Sabah illegally and trees being felled in the state to be smuggled out, Deputy Chief Minister Datuk Ghapur Salleh said today.

He accused Primary Industries Minister Datuk Seri Dr Lim Keng Yaik for breaching the agreement signed between Malaysia and Indonesia to stamp out smuggling activities between the two neighbouring countries.

Ghapur, who is heading a high-powered State Cabinet committee to investigate allegations of log smuggling in Tawau, said he had documents to prove that smuggling of timber into Sabah was going on for a long time due to loose procedures and irresponsible attitude of certain parties.

"Since 1996, there are many customs manifest endorsed by MTIB director-general that the logs exported originated from Indonesia.

"I am quoting to you one case only, that was on Aug 9 last year. I'm surprised they were declared by and certified by MTIB that the logs came from Indonesia. There are lot more other cases," he told a news conference at his office here.

Ghapur, who showed reporters files containing the documents, denied claims by Dr Lim in Kuala Lumpur yesterday that he (Ghapur) was making uncalled for statements on the log smuggling issue.

"Actually, it is Keng Yaik who is twisting the statements as he wants to cover up the slip-ups of his ministry or agencies under his purview.

"I've got documentary evidence, Keng Yaik can come and see me and we can even have a joint press conference," he said.

Ghapur said the Sabah government viewed the issue seriously as it involved evasion of substantial amount in royalty payments which should be a source of state revenue.

He said the probe report would be handed to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim tomorrow by Chief Minister Datuk Yong Teck Lee.

Ghapur, who is also Sabah Finance Minister, said if it was true that the logs were from Indonesia, he was surprised why Dr Lim allowed the logs to come into Sabah as the country had banned timber exports.

Furthermore, Malaysia and Indonesia have an understanding to prevent illegal logging activities along the common borders of both countries, he said.

"If the manifest (on logs from Indonesia) is true, then it contravened the joint ministerial meeting of the Indonesia-Malaysia working committee on forestry in Pulau Pinang from Oct 15 to 18 last year chaired by Keng Yaik himself.

"It looks like Keng Yaik agreed in the meeting (on the joint declaration to stamp out illegal logging activities) but later allowed logs from Indonesia to be smuggled into Sabah to be exported," he said.

The Pulau Pinang Declaration, among others, state that Malaysia and Indonesia agreed to cooperate closely and each side must step up efforts to discourage and prevent smuggling activities at source.

He said he "still wants to believe" that the 3,049 logs detained at Pulau Sebatik on Jan 18 were from Sabah although the consignment did not bear the Forestry Department stamp.

"But if the logs were from Indonesia as endorsed by MTIB, then Keng Yaik has violated the Pulau Pinang Declaration. Dr Lim said the timber were

excess logs but from where the excess logs came from.

"He did not say from where the logs came from, instead he said the permits were issued to import timber from Papua New Guinea and New Zealand but the customs manifest state the logs detained in Tawau were from Indonesia," he said.

Asked whether he was sure whether the customs manifest were genuine, he said he believed they were genuine.

"However, a special panel can be set up to verify the authenticity of the signature of the MTIB director-general on the manifest," he said.

Ghapur also said anything could happen in the vast border such as the possibility of trees felled in Sabah and dragged into the Indonesian border to claim that the logs were from the neighbouring country.

He also denied Keng Yaik's statement yesterday that only four companies were given the approval to re-export logs last year and that only one company Raspond made use of it.

"Many permits were issued in 1996. He issued many licences. He claims only four but I can probably check and reveal to you more than that," he said.

The logs issue sparked a controversy between the Sabah government and the Primary Industries Ministry when the State Forestry Department detained "MV Able Helmsmen" registered in Port Klang with a consignment of logs worth RM6 million in Tawau on Jan 18 believed to be on its way to Japan.

Two days later, Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim ordered the state government to form a high-powered committee to investigate the case.

Replying to reporters questions, Ghapur said he was not aware of press reports that the Sabah Forestry Department director Awang Tengah Awang Amin has been asked to go on leave for a month.

Asked on the contents of the report to be submitted to Dr Mahathir tomorrow, he said among the recommendations proposed were on loopholes in the existing procedures governing log exports.

"The report is prepared based on documents available. We inform the Prime Minister on the smuggling activities and maybe the higher authorities will decide on the powers of the State Forestry Department," he added. --

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