

23/09/1997

2,000-strong team off to Indonesia (HL)

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KUALA LUMPUR, Mon. - A contingent of 2,000 firefighters, medical and communications experts and support staff will leave for Indonesia starting today to help put out forest fires which have blanketed neighbouring countries in a choking haze.

National Disaster Management and Relief Committee chairman Datuk Mohamed Rahmat, who is also Information Minister, said the 2,000 men were from the Royal Malaysian Air Force, Fire Services and Rescue Department and Meteorological Services Department.

They will leave for Sumatra and Kalimantan on board three Royal Malaysian Navy ships.

The first batch of 1,040 firemen and 24 members of the Special Malaysian Rescue Team (Smart) will leave for Dumai in Sumatra on board the KD Mahawangsa multi-purpose command and control ship and the KD Sri Banggi.

Both ships are scheduled to depart from the North Port in Port Klang at 9pm.

Another RMN multi-purpose command and control ship, the KD Inderasakti, will leave for Balikpapan in Kalimantan, via Tawau and Sandakan in Sabah at about the same time.

The stopover in Sabah is to enable the Inderasakti to pick up 80 firemen from the State's Fire Services and Rescue Department and their supporting teams.

Accompanying the team are three radio and communication officers and three paramedics from the Fifth Infantry Brigade Army Garrison in Lok Kawi, near Kota Kinabalu.

A 110-member team from the Sarawak Fire Services and Rescue Department is expected to be deployed to neighbouring West Kalimantan via land through the Tebedu entry point, about 90km from Kuching.

A National Security Council spokesman said the three ships would also carry fire-fighting and other equipment.

He said medical, armed forces communications and support teams would also accompany the firefighters.

Speaking to the Press after this morning's National Disaster Management and Relief Committee meeting chaired by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, Mohamed said two C130 Hercules aircraft would be used for cloud-seeding in Kalimantan. Indonesia will also use two of its planes for this.

Kuching has been chosen as the operations base for the Malaysian planes because of its proximity to Kalimantan.

It is learnt that the Hercules C130 can carry up to four water tanks. Each tank has a capacity of 1,500 litres.

Mohamed said Malaysia would also conduct cloud-seeding in Sumatra later using an airport in the Peninsula as the operations base.

The air force has already mobilised eight aircraft, four Hercules C130s and four Caribous for cloud-seeding in Indonesia and Malaysia.

In Jakarta, Indonesian Co-ordinating Minister for People's Welfare Azwar Anas, speaking after meeting with President Suharto, said the Malaysians were being sent to "assist Indonesia in fighting the fires in forests which had been cleared for plantations in Sumatra."

Anas said that Riau Governor Soeripto had suggested that it might be better for the Malaysian firefighters to be sent to neighbouring Jambi and South Sumatra as forest fires in Riau were diminishing.

He said Malaysia also offered the Royal Malaysian Air Force's C-130 Hercules transport planes to conduct cloud-seeding in Indonesia and allowed Indonesian aircraft involved in such operations to use its airports in Subang and Labuan if necessary.

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