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PM: Ban building of houses on river banks (HL)

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KOTA KINABALU, Sat. - To avoid disasters similar to the one in Keningau district, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has directed that State Governments ensure employers prohibit their workers from building houses along river banks.

The Prime Minister, who today visited the storm-ravaged district where 189 bodies have been recovered since Dec 26, said he would discuss the matter with other State Governments to make the prohibition effective for the whole country.

"Efforts must be made to provide workers sites away from rivers to build houses," he told a Press conference before leaving for Kuala Lumpur this afternoon.

Dr Mahathir said the high rate of casualties, particularly in the Keningau district, after tropical storm Greg hit Sabah last week was due to the existence of residents living on both sides of rivers.

He said houses were not only built along the river banks but also on the rivers.

"Naturally, when big floods occurred, these settlements were washed away, resulting in a long trail of losses in lives and property."

Asked whether as a long-term precaution his directive would also be applied throughout the country, the Prime Minister said: "It has to be done ... but have to discuss with the various State Governments.

"The problem here is whether there is land available for the resettlement of residents now living along rivers."

Dr Mahathir, accompanied by Chief Minister Datuk Yong Teck Lee, Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Chong Kah Kiat, and Land and Co-operative Development Minister Datuk Osu Sukam had earlier toured Keningau. Dr Mahathir was given a briefing on the disaster by Keningau police chief Superintendent Onn Muda and district officer Louis Rampas.

Keningau bore the brunt of the worst natural disaster in the country when a rainstorm swept away houses along the Pampang, Liawan, Bayayo and Senagang rivers on Dec 26 following heavy rain the previous night.

Dr Mahathir said the affected residents, though warned about the rainstorm, did not move out as they had not expected such a disaster. He said it had been 40 years since such a disaster struck Keningau.

Dr Mahathir said the Government was also aware that the majority of the victims in Keningau were foreigners but for the time being those with employment would be allowed to continue working for their employers.

"But they (foreigners) must live at out-of-danger areas."

Asked whether logging activities were responsible for the floods, he said: "After an aerial tour of the affected areas, it was apparent that logging, illegal or legal, was not the cause.

"There were landslides and signs of shifting cultivation in the upper part of the rivers in Keningau. The trees washed down by floods were remnants of shifting cultivation activities."

Shifting cultivation activities by natives are allowed in Sabah and Sarawak.

Dr Mahathir said he was shown a video of the areas and there were no logging activities along the Crocker Range where all the affected rivers originated.

However, he said there were also locals who owned land and had cut down trees for sale, but this was not rampant.

The Prime Minister said he was satisfied with the search and rescue operations at Keningau and thanked all concerned. He said most of the victims warded had been allowed to return home.

Dr Mahathir also recorded the Government's thanks to those who had contributed generously to the fund for the victims under the State Disaster Relief Committee.

Meanwhile, members of the Special Malaysian Disaster Rescue Team, or SMART, today left for Kuala Lumpur after an eight-day tour of duty assisting search and rescue operations in the Keningau and Tenom districts.

The elite squad arrived on Dec 27, a day after tropical storm Greg struck, washing away hundreds of homes.

The squad was sent to Keningau.

State director of the Security Division of the Prime Minister's Department Asri Ahmad today said search and rescue operations in the two districts would be continued by other agencies.

Others involved in the operation in Keningau were the police, army, Fire Services Department, Civil Defence Corps, medical personnel, Red Crescent Society, non-governmental organisations and residents.

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