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Probe into cases of local authorities breaching laws

Leong Shen-li

PETALING JAYA, Sun. - The Housing and Local Government Ministry has begun investigating cases of local authorities breaching laws relating to tree felling, hill cutting and housing development, Deputy Minister Datuk Azmi Khalid said today.

He said his ministry last week directed the Town and Country Planning Department to look into these cases due to the worrying number of breaches of the Town and Country Planning Act 1976 by local authorities.

"These provisions are law, yet only when the Prime Minister (Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad) points them out personally, do the authorities follow them," he said when closing the Local Communities and the Environment Seminar at Shah's Village Hotel.

He said most breaches occurred in areas such as the submission of contour plans, the felling of trees and the cutting of hills for development projects.

"Unfortunately, these things are connected to politicians and businessmen. But when it comes to the (implementation of the) law, I can only call them (politicians and businessmen) environmental rogues."

When asked how the problem of States not co-operating could be overcome, he said many quarters, including New Straits Times group editor Datuk A. Kadir Jasin through his Other Thots column, were already calling for an amendment to the Federal Constitution in crucial matters.

Kadir in his column today had called for a reduction in the powers of States in land and natural resources because States paid mere lip service to environmental conservation.

Azmi said: "If these suggestions are good, they could be looked into."

He also criticised various government agencies, including local government authorities, for failing in their enforcement duties. He said cases of unmanned hotlines and the practice of passing the buck had reached appalling levels.

"I personally tested the enforcement mechanism of one municipal councils after I found its hotline unmanned when I wanted to complain about open burning in the compound of a private bungalow."

He added that two other agencies also failed to act.

Although Azmi named the municipal council and the two departments in his speech, he asked that their names not be published.

He also said the ministry had made a proposal last month that all the hotlines of critical agencies be displayed at the bottom of billboards along highways and other public areas.

"They will be colour coded so that the public will immediately recognise which agency the hotline is for," he said, adding that the proposal had been forwarded to Chief Secretary to the Government Tan Sri Abdul Halim Ali.

It would include a mechanism which would make people responsible for enforcement, thereby curbing the practice of unmanned hotlines, passing the buck and also ignoring complaints which had already been received.

On public toilets, Azmi said his ministry had just completed a study, which began in August, on why they were always filthy.

The study, he said, had identified several areas like the use of poor quality equipment which explained their deplorable state.

Various papers on the urban environment and the role of local authorities in environmental protection were presented during the two-day

Local Communities and the Environment seminar organised by the
Environmental Protection Society of Malaysia.
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