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Remedy situation, our investors in Indonesia urged

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KUALA LUMPUR, Thurs. - Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today he hoped Malaysian investors in Indonesia blamed for some of the forest fires there would take remedial action fast.

He felt they should extend their assistance to overcome the problem which has resulted in haze blanketing Malaysia and neighbouring countries.

He said measures which could be taken included cloud-seeding or mobilising workers to put out the fires.

"We cannot just ignore the problem and blame the Indonesians for the fires. We are responsible as the companies belong to us," he said.

Dr Mahathir was speaking to reporters after launching the 1997-99 Road Safety Campaign for Motorcyclists at Dataran Merdeka. He wore a respiratory mask when he arrived for the launching.

Asked about it, the Prime Minister said it was due to the haze, adding that he hoped others would do the same to protect their health.

On criticisms from some quarters that the Government had not done enough to overcome the haze, he said:

"We do not know what else can be done. Cloud-seeding has been carried out but even that did not seem effective."

Asked about the letter he sent to President Suharto, Dr Mahathir said it was to seek Indonesia's co-operation on the haze problem.

On Suharto's apology for causing the haze, he said Malaysia appreciated the gesture.

"It would have been difficult if they had denied the matter. But the Indonesians have admitted that the problems originate there, although we are also affected.

"So, with co-operation like this, I am sure the next time we can detect the fires earlier, allowing remedial measures to be taken."

If fires had raged over large areas of forest, Dr Mahathir said it would be more difficult to put them out.

Dr Mahathir was also asked on the plan approved by the Cabinet to fight the haze, including closing schools when the Air Pollutant Index reaches 400 and public and private sector workers with health problems should leave the affected zones once the index hits 250 for three consecutive days.

To this, he said the measures were recommended to the Cabinet but no final decision had been made.

Asked to comment on the proposal by Works Minister Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu that all contracts for government projects be awarded through the open or competitive system, Dr Mahathir said this was already in practice.

"But sometimes when the need arises to hasten the process (awarding of tenders), we have selected tenders ... everybody gets a chance."

On his meeting with Menteri Besar and Chief Ministers yesterday, Dr Mahathir said he had asked for co-operation from them on joint action to be taken by the Federal and State Governments to strengthen the country's economy.

Asked whether the meeting was called because some States had failed to adhere to earlier directives to cut expenditure and reduce imports, the Prime Minister said there were instances where some States had been extravagant in their spending.

"For instance, there are overseas trips where the number of participants is too big ... this is not essential. Local authorities also conduct such

trips. We are spending too much on such events."

On whether such trips had been banned, Dr Mahathir said the directive was only for the number to be reduced.

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