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LEAD Mahathir-Emergency

SARAWAK DECLARES STATE OF HAZE EMERGENCY

KUALA LUMPUR, Sept 19 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today announced a state of haze emergency for the whole of Sarawak when the Air Pollutant Index (API) breached the 600 mark, far surpassing the hazardous level of 301 to 500.

Dr Mahathir, as National Operations Director, in his declaration letter, announced that the state of emergency would be in force until revoked.

The declaration of haze emergency was announced by Information Minister Datuk Mohamed Rahmat, as chairman of the National Disaster Relief Management Committee, at a news conference at the National Operations Room, Prime Minister's Department, here, at 10.43am.

Sarawak Chief Minister Tan Sri Abdul Taib Mahmud, who is also the state Operations Director, announced the state of emergency to the people of Sarawak over Radio RTM Kuching.

The state of emergency, however, does not involve a curfew, according to the declaration letter signed by the prime minister, copies of which were distributed to the mass media.

It also does not involve any changes to the state government's administration style and system.

The API in Sarawak breached the 400 mark last night, forcing the government to close schools in the state today. The situation deteriorated with the API hitting the 625 mark at 9am today and 635 an hour later, five times the level of 136 yesterday morning.

According to the declaration, although a curfew will not be imposed, the Royal Malaysia Police and the Armed Forces were directed to arrange and take the necessary steps to ensure peace and security in Sarawak.

With the declaration, the Sarawak Disaster Relief and Management Committee is empowered to order the closure of all government and private sector offices, except the essential services like hospitals and food supply outlets.

All schools are closed while factories and estate operations and construction and quarry works must stop.

The whole country had been shrouded in haze for the past month due to the raging fires in hundred of thousands of hectares of forests in Sumatra and Kalimantan, Indonesia, which is facing a drought.

The situation deteriorated last weekend with the API readings in several states, especially, Sarawak, Kuala Lumpur and Negeri Sembilan (Nilai area), breaching the hazardous level of 301-500.

The people have started to wear masks to reduce breathing in particulate matter while the Cabinet has drawn up an action plan which includes mobilising the police and military to act against open burnings which can aggravate the situation.

Mohamed stressed that the haze emergency was declared to safeguard the health of the people in the affected areas and to prevent accidents due to poor visibility caused by the haze.

He did not want the people to misinterpret the order and cause unnecessary concern.

He said that through this decision, the government wanted the people of Sarawak to remain indoors and not to go out unless necessary.

If they have to go out they should wear masks as a precaution against the effects of the haze.

"We want to create an atmosphere where the people will be safer," he said.

Mohamed also asked all parties to avoid pointing the finger at and blaming anyone for the current haze and instead to concentrate on helping to overcome the problem.

"What is important now is how we can help put out the forest fires (in Indonesia). This is the time for the Asean spirit to come into play to help Indonesia," said Mohamed, who also reminded political parties not to politicise the haze issue.

The government hoped that the haze problem would be overcome quickly because it did not want the state of emergency to be extended nationwide, he said.

"It was not easy for the government to declare this emergency because it touches the people's lives and the country's economy," he said.

Mohamed said the government was asking the Asean countries, especially Singapore, and France and Japan to help Indonesia put out the forest fires because the situation had reached disastrous proportions.

He would contact the Indonesian authorities to inform them of the assistance offered, including sending a fire services and rescue team to help put out the fires and a Royal Malaysian Air Force skyvan to carry out cloud seeding.

He would also seek permission from the Indonesian government to enable the parties concerned to enter Indonesian territory, especially in Kalimantan, to help put out the fires there and hoped that the Indonesian authorities would accept the offer.

Mohamed also appealed to owners of mobile water pumps in the country to donate or sell them to the government so that they could be sent to Indonesia to help put out the fires.

They could contact any fire station in the country to send the equipment, he said.

Meanwhile, the Royal Malaysian Air Force is preparing to use its aircraft for cloud seeding to create rain in Malaysia to reduce the haze.

At the state level, special prayers are offered at the mosques, churches and temples for an improvement in the weather conditions.

Last Saturday, the Sultan of Pahang, Tengku Abdullah Sultan Ahmad Shah, asked all mosques in the state to conduct special prayers to seek divine help to clear the haze shrouding the country now. -- BERNAMA

AFY JK