

20/09/1997

State of emergency in Sarawak (HL)

Ramlan Said; Sarban Singh; M. Jeffri Razali

KUALA LUMPUR, Fri. - As a state of emergency is enforced in Sarawak, Malaysia announced measures to combat the haze at home while offering assistance to Indonesia to fight the forest fires in Sumatra which had led to haze blanketing neighbouring countries.

The order by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad in his capacity as the National Operations Director came into effect today as Malaysia prepares to send 80 firemen to Sumatra to help fight the raging forest and peat fires.

Fire-fighting equipment worth RM1.5 million is due to arrive here next week while the Government sought assistance from other countries.

Foreign help is expected to come in the form of manpower and equipment like water-bombers, aeroplanes for cloud-seeding operations and water pumps. France has indicated it will send a team here.

In his declaration of emergency released to the Press this morning, Dr Mahathir said:

"We have decided to impose an emergency in Sarawak as the Air Pollutant Index reading there has breached the 500 level. This is also because the situation is expected to continue for some time."

At 2pm, the API reading in the Sarawak capital had reached 654.

As the order came into force, streets in the Sarawak capital were deserted as schools, businesses, factories, and Government offices shut.

Shops selling food, markets, supermarkets, clinics and pharmacies, however, remain open.

The Government has assured the public that essential services like public transport and hospitals will continue to be in operation.

To ensure the continuity of peace and security in the State, police and the Armed Forces are stepping up their operations.

Air links between Peninsular Malaysia and airports in Kuching, Sibul, Miri and Bintulu were also severed from noon today, as the Department of Civil Aviation ordered the temporary closure of the airports.

Visibility in ports were also reported to be poor, but shipping activities were said to be not as badly affected as the cancellation of flights by Malaysia Airlines to Sarawak.

Speaking to reporters after delivering his inaugural address at the Universiti Malaya's alumni reunion at the main campus in Lembah Pantai, Dr Mahathir said the Royal Malaysian Air Force would be roped in to assist in the ongoing cloud-seeding operations.

The use of an undisclosed number of military aircraft will compliment that of a private aircraft chartered from Pan Malaysian Air Transport Sdn Bhd.

Since Sept 8, the company using its Skyvan light aircraft had attempted several cloud-seeding operations, with some success, in the Klang Valley.

The Government is also willing to deploy the RMAF aircraft for similar operations in Indonesia, said Dr Mahathir.

Meanwhile, the air quality in Nilai, Negri Sembilan, and Gombak here, have reached the hazardous level tonight, according to the Department of Environment.

Bernama reports that the API for Nilai was 314 and Gombak 304 compared to 123 yesterday.

The air quality in Kajang, Petaling Jaya, Klang, Ipoh, and Johor Baru were also at unhealthy levels.

The air quality over Kuala Lumpur was at a very unhealthy level with the API reading at 292, eight points short of the hazardous level. The API for Malacca was 244.

In Jakarta, Indonesia has begun cloud-seeding operations over the Riau province.

"Air has started to become clearer and planes have landed again at Simpang Tiga airport in Pekanbaru," Antung Dedi, an official of the coordinating team on land and forest fires control told Reuters.

(END)