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## State of haze emergency in Sarawak

PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad yesterday 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 will 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 yesterday at the National Operations Room, Prime Minister's Department in Kuala Lumpur at 10.43am.

Sarawak Chief Minister Tan Sri Abdul Taib Mahmud, who is also the state operations director, announced the state of emergency over Radio RTM Kuching.

The state of emergency, however, does not involve imposing 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 yesterday, forcing the Government to close schools in the state yesterday. The situation deteriorated with the API hitting the 625-mark at 9am yesterday and 635 an hour later, five times the level of 136 on Thursday morning.

According to the declaration, although a curfew will not be imposed, the Royal Malaysia Police and the Armed Forces are 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 were 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.

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 burning 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 Association of South-East Asian Nations (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 problem will be over quickly because it does 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 affects the people's lives and the country's economy," he said.

Mohamed said the Government is asking Asean members, 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.

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