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Stop issuing permits for log exports, ministry told

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KOTA KINABALU, Sat. - The Sabah Government wants the Primary Industries Ministry to stop issuing approvals or permits to export logs from Sabah.

This will be among the proposals to be submitted to the Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad on Monday together with the report of the State special committee investigating the smuggling of logs from Sabah.

Deputy Chief Minister Datuk Abdul Ghapur Salleh, who is also Finance Minister, said matters relating to forestry was sole right of the State Government but it seemed that the ministry had also staked a claim of jurisdiction.

Abdul Ghapur claimed this was the case when logs worth RM6 million were seized from a cargo vessel Able Helmsmen in Tawau on Jan 18 as the documents authorising export of the logs were that of the ministry.

He said although the State Government was aware that the ministry had approved the export of excess logs by a Tawau-based company in October last year, valid until Dec 31, 1996, it did not apply to the Jan 18 incident.

"In the recent case even though documents showed it was issued by the Primary Industries Ministry ... we (State Forestry Department) did not know about it, if we had known, royalty would have been collected from the company."

In Kuala Lumpur, a Federal-level committee had been set up to assist in the investigations, Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim said.

He said the committee, in addition to the State-level committee which was set up earlier, would co-ordinate the investigations at the Federal level.

It is being headed Treasury's deputy secretary-general Datuk Shahbuddin Imam Mohamed.

Anwar was asked whether a senior politician in Sabah has been implicated in the smuggling operations.

"I don't know yet. It is still being investigated. Let them prepare the report," he said.

Anwar was speaking to reporters after witnessing the second Islamic bond issue totalling RM2.2 billion by Kuala Lumpur International Airport Bhd.

Asked why was there a need for a Federal-level committee when the State-level panel was already investigating the matter, Anwar said: "Well, certain agencies like Customs are under the Federal Government."

Abdul Ghapur said Federal ministries should not encroach into authorities under the State Government's jurisdiction.

The State Government is the sole authority over forestry matters in Sabah under the State Forestry Enactment 1968.

He said if the Primary Industries Ministry was allowed to continue issuing approvals to export logs without knowledge of the State Forestry Department, Sabah would suffered substantial losses in revenue from royalty.

Ghapur, who heads the special committee, said a detailed report on the Jan 18 incident was almost completed.

The committee was formed by the State Cabinet on a directive by Anwar on Monday.

Anwar made the directive in Tawau after briefed by Chief Minister Datuk Yong Teck Lee about log-smuggling activities in Tawau when the Klang-registered Able Helmsmen was detained on Jan 18. Six others vessels had

sailed off with millions of ringgit worth of logs.

Ghapur said should the ministry want to grant export or re-export of logs or excess logs, the approvals and permits must be issued through the State Forestry Department.

"This is the procedure," he said.

Ghapur said in the Tawau case the Forestry Department was in the dark as no information was received from the ministry or the Malaysia Timber Industry Board.

On Primary Industries Minister Datuk Seri Dr Lim Keng Yaik's statement in the New Straits Times yesterday that his ministry had given the approval to Tawau-based company to re-export excess logs, Ghapur said: "We do not know where are the excess logs Dr Lim was talking about."

He said in the Jan 18 case, the documents were also certified by the Police Field Force based at the Sabah-Kalimantan border when in actual fact this was not part of the procedure.

Meanwhile, at the same function, Ghapur received RM21,900 in donations from Golden Hope Plantation Sdn Bhd, Wanita Barisan Nasional Tawau and Felda Umas Umas settlers for the State Disaster's Greg Victims Fund.

The fund now stands at RM4.9 million.

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