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UN pledges RM42.5m towards wetlands project

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KUALA LUMPUR, Mon. - Support and recognition are pouring in for the Wetlands Sanctuary Project in Kuala Langat with the United Nations pledging RM42.5 million (US\$17 million) for the project.

Chief Secretary to the Government and Malaysian Wetlands Foundation chairman Tan Sri Abdul Halim Ali said today the UN funding will be through the GEF - an interim funding mechanism under the Convention on Biological Diversity which provides grants and funding to meet the costs of projects beneficial to the environment.

He added that the foundation, which was responsible for undertaking and managing the project, also received pledges worth RM3.5 million from three local companies - Bank Bumiputra (RM2 million), Renong Group (RM1 million) and Hong Kong Bank (RM500,000).

Halim was speaking to reporters after launching the International Workshop to begin the design phase for the Malaysian Wetlands Sanctuary Project.

The project, covering a 5,000ha site in Kuala Langat, will encompass a myriad of ecosystems, namely degraded tin mine land, logged peat swamp forests, large open lakes and the Kuala Langat Permanent Peat Swamp Forest.

The design phase will last nine weeks and plans will be drawn up for the development of the site into a sanctuary.

Completed plans are expected to be presented to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who is also the foundation's patron, by mid-August while parts of the sanctuary will be opened to the public by September 1998.

Halim said a great deal of funding would be needed for the project but the foundation was confident of getting it, considering the initial response from the UN and the Malaysian private sector.

Foundation chief executive officer Muralee Menon said some of the facilities to be built on the site were visitors' centres, children's centres, chalets, bird hides, canopy walkways and a floating restaurant.

He, however, added that these would form a small part of the entire project, which would be dedicated mainly to conservation and research activities.

Menon said the first and most important task of the foundation was to begin documentation for the ISO 14000 environmental standards accreditation for the project.

He said the foundation, through the nine-week workshop, was getting advice from more than 52 experts from around the world, and any development in the area would be carried out with utmost care.

On sandmining activities which reportedly caused serious damage to the area, Halim said the Selangor State Government had pledged to stop these works as soon as possible.

"We are hopeful that all these activities will stop but of course, now it is a question of enforcement.

"We will work closely with the State Government to ensure that although the licences have expired, there are no illegal activities taking place.

"I have been told that the licences of such companies will expire soon or have already expired," Halim said.

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