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Open burning: More to get arrest powers

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SEPANG, Tues. - In a move to check all forms of open burning, the National Disaster Relief and Management Committee has proposed that the power to investigate, arrest and prosecute under the Environmental Quality Act be extended to several other authorities.

Committee chairman Datuk Mohamed Rahmat said a final decision was expected tomorrow.

Among the authorities, beside the Department of Environment, proposed for these powers, are the Police, Fire and Rescue Department, the Health Ministry and the local authorities.

"We will be looking at the category of officers who could be empowered to carry out the task," he said at a Press conference after visiting the site of the peat fires at Paya Indah at Kuala Langat.

Mohamed, who is also the Information Minister said Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and the Cabinet were very concerned over open burning that could bring back the haze to the country.

"It is time to stop blaming others for the haze ... we must look at the haze created by either the people or nature domestically."

On extending the power to nab and prosecute offenders, he said this would complement the efforts of the Department of Environment.

Mohamed said DOE did not have enough manpower for a nationwide operation.

"With this move, we can create a bigger pool of officers," he said, comparing it to the the power the army was given by the Ministry of Primary Industries to detain illegal loggers.

The Minister of Science, Technology and Environment Datuk Law Hieng Ding had said yesterday the DOE would soon prosecute a landowner and a company for open burning in fulfilment of its threat to deal sternly with those responsible for land and forest fires.

He said the department would press for the maximum fine of RM100,000 and a jail sentence of five years under the Act.

If convicted, they will also be made to pay for the cost of putting out the fires and for the enforcement operations.

Mohamed said this was also first act by the committee to activate the anti-haze action plan this year. This directive would be distributed in all States and districts.

To a question whether the Act provided for extension of powers to other authorities, he said: "Yes, there are provisions in the Act."

Also present with Mohamed on his visit to the site were the director-general of the National Security Council, Datuk Jaafar Ismail, Kuala Langat district officer Mohd Yusop Mat Judin, Selangor Chief Police Officer Datuk Kamaruddin Hamzah and Director of Selangor Fire Services and Rescue Wan Mohd Nor Ibrahim.

On the fires in the Kuala Langat areas, he said, surface fires have been contained but the peat fires had reached between 10 and 15 feet below the surface.

Mohamed who visited an 80-hectare site near Kampung Seri Cheding added that the fire-fighters were now building two "dams" in the waterways.

They had also asked for an army helicopter to airlift two water pumps to the inaccessible area to pump water.

"It will take seven to 10 days for the water level to rise as it has to travel about 1.2 km to the site," he added.

The idea was to "flood" the periphery of this area, identified as being seriously affected by peat fires.

This would raise the water table to a level which could help overcome the peat fires. The drought has led to a serious lowering of the water table. Thus, the dry peat caught fire and was difficult to put out.

"Even after "flooding", the chances of a fire recurring remain," he said. Constant surveillance was needed.

Mohamed also instructed the district office and relevant authorities to ask people in the Orang Asli settlements in the area to refrain from "slash and burn" land clearing.

He said fires had destroyed about 400 hectares.

Mohamed also commended the joint-efforts of the various agencies including personnel from the Royal Malay Regiment in helping to fight the fires.

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