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Open burning watch

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PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad will be given daily updates on cases of open burning under the nationwide Haze/Open Burning Operation launched today.

Minister of Science, Technology and Environment Datuk Law Hieng Ding said the Prime Minister views the open burning issue very seriously.

"The Department of Environment (DOE) will submit reports directly to the Prime Minister," he told reporters at his ministry in Kuala Lumpur yesterday.

In a bid to tackle the problem of open burning and the excessive vehicle emissions, the DOE launched the operation on April 8 in Selangor and Federal Territory.

"Under the operation, aerial surveillance to detect cases of open burning will be carried out by the police air wing unit.

"Information on the fires will then be immediately dispatched to the DOE for subsequent enforcement and action," he said.

He added that one helicopter and three fixed-wing aircraft will be mobilised for aerial surveillance throughout the country.

Apart from the police helicopter, the department, he said, will also look into the possibility of using aircraft from local flying clubs as well as locally-made light aircraft.

A total of 39 teams have been set up to mobilise the operation. At the same time, the fire and rescue departments will also be informed of the open burning cases detected to put out the fires.

"This operation is in line with the Cabinet directive for all relevant agencies to increase enforcement efforts to tackle the problem of open burning and vehicle emissions," he said.

He added that the operation launched on April 8 had detected cases of open burning where on April 9, for example, seven areas of open burning were detected.

These cases, he said, were at plantations as well as landfills.

A meeting was also held yesterday at the DOE headquarters attended by all the state DOE directors. At the meeting, a detailed briefing as well as a summary of the operation's implementation procedure was carried out, he said.

Law has also written to the Chief Justice and the Attorney General to take stern action against those found guilty of open burning as well as for the courts to deal with the cases expeditiously.

He added that where necessary, legislation will be amended to take action against those responsible for open burning.

"For example, if present laws hamper action to be taken on land owners, the ministry will then amend the Environmental Quality Act (EQA)," he said, adding that the Attorney General's chambers is presently looking at the existing laws to see if amendments are required.

Under the EQA, those found guilty of open burning will face a maximum fine of RM100,000 or five years' jail or both.

The minister added that the department will press for mandatory jail sentence for those found guilty of open burning.

Law said that to tackle the problem of forest fires and haze in the region, Asean member countries will seek funding from the Global Environment Facility (GEF).

"The GEF had a meeting in New Delhi recently where it was made known

that US\$2 billion (US\$1 = RM3.66) of funds are available," he said.

He was unable to disclose the amount sought and added that consultations will be carried out with Asean members.

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