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Cabinet agrees to expedite work on ground receiving station

KUALA LUMPUR, Wed. - The Cabinet today agreed to expedite the project to set up a ground receiving station so that satellites can be used to monitor the country's environmentally sensitive and protected areas.

Science, Technology and Environment Minister Datuk Law Hieng Ding said there were over 60 such areas.

The Cabinet has agreed that the tendering process for the purchase of equipment for the station should be expedited.

"We will call for the tenders soon. Several local and foreign companies with local partners have expressed interest," he said after the Cabinet meeting.

Last Wednesday, the Cabinet had directed the Malaysian Centre for Remote Sensing (Macres) to use satellites to monitor all water catchments, forest reserves, highland development sites, State and national parks and highly sensitive coastal areas.

Macres has to submit satellite photographs of these areas to the Cabinet.

The directive followed concern by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad on rampant cutting of trees and encroachment into protected areas.

Dr Mahathir raised this concern at the recent National Forestry Council meeting.

Construction of the ground receiving station, in Temerloh, started last year and is to be completed in a few months. It was supposed to be completed last July but delayed "due to unforeseen circumstances".

Law said the initial estimates for the project was RM71 million.

"We need to the station to monitor the areas because we are now buying satellite photographs from other countries.

"The problem is we have to pay a substantial amount. Moreover, we have to wait for the availability of a time slot to obtain the photographs we want."

At present, Malaysia is buying satellite data from Thailand, the United States and Europe. It spends about RM4 million annually to obtain mapping data on land use patterns and management of natural resources.

Data from the US and Europe are usually delayed three to six months.

The ground station will receive satellite data for immediate processing from Spot (France-owned), Radarsat (Canada), IRS-IC (India) and NOAA (the US).

It will be linked with Macres' headquarters in Kuala Lumpur by fibre optics where the satellite data will be processed in detail.

At today's meeting, Law presented to the Cabinet satellite photos of the Temengor/Belum and Tasik Bera catchment areas taken in June 1997.

"The photographs show the forests are intact. We will continue to monitor these areas," he said.

On the weather situation, Law said the major part of La Nina was over. "We are now towards the end of La Nina. The La Nina is not developing the way we predicted earlier.

"It was originally forecast that there would be a weak La Nina from mid October to November and it would go to a 'moderate level' in February," he said.

On the privatisation of the Malaysian Meteorological Service, Law said the companies given the project were still negotiating with the Economic Planning Unit. They are Progressive Impact Corp Sdn Bhd and Budaya Ria Sdn

Bhd .

( END )