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Clearing of Lojing forest causes siltation woes

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KUALA LUMPUR, Wed. - More than 8,800 hectares of forested highlands at Lojing, Kelantan, has been cleared for agriculture and logging, causing serious siltation problems in nearby rivers and threatening the lifespan of the Pergau hydroelectric dam.

Cutting off such hilly terrains has also disrupted the slope stability, making the area prone to landslides during heavy rain.

Although the Kelantan Government had in 1997 denied reports of environmental degradation in the Lojing Highlands, satellite pictures revealed that 8,860 hectares of forest areas at 1000 metres above sea level had been opened up.

The satellite pictures, accompanied by a report, were submitted to the Cabinet today by Science, Technology and Environment Minister Datuk Law Hieng Ding.

"The Prime Minister said the matter was serious and is very concerned about it.

"With the pictures, they (the Kelantan Government) cannot deny that logging and land-clearing are not taking place," he said after the Cabinet meeting.

Law said he would write a letter to the Kelantan Menteri Besar about the matter so that immediate measures could be taken to rectify the problem.

The Lojing Highlands are made up of primary forests, most of which are located in areas above 1,000 metres in altitude.

Logging and land-clearing for agriculture have caused serious environmental degradation in the area. Besides affecting the slope stability, Law said three rivers - Sungai Berok, Sungai Ber and Sungai Perolak - have become polluted with silt washed down from the exposed hilly slopes.

"As a result, sedimentation has occurred in the rivers' tributaries, streams and a dam," said Law. He did not say which dam but the Pergau Hydroelectric Dam is the only one in the State.

Sedimentation and siltation can reduce the dam capacity and can increase the maintenance costs like the situation at the Ringlet Reservoir in Cameron Highlands.

The possible impacts include:

- * the destruction of fish, plants and other organisms in the rivers, and recreational areas.

- * ecosystem degradation and loss of water catchment and flood control functions.

"To prevent these, logging and land-clearing in areas above 1,000 metres should be controlled. Once environmental degradation has occurred, it is difficult to rehabilitate the ecosystems," said Law.

He said the State Government should also implement the decision made by the National Forestry Council at its 14th meeting on Dec 28 last year for all forest areas at altitudes of 1,000 metres and above to be gazetted as protected forests. This is in addition to the condition to prohibit clearing of terrains more than 40 degrees in gradient as stipulated in the Forest Act 1984.

"The meeting which was chaired by the Prime Minister had agreed to this decision. It was attended by all Menteris Besar, Chief Ministers and their representatives. They have all agreed to the decision. Therefore, they should abide by their own decision."

The decision was also frontpaged by the New Straits Times on Jan 25.

This is not the first time the issue of the indiscriminate clearing of Lojing is being raised. It was first highlighted in August 1994 when Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad expressed concern that the State Government was allowing development on hillslopes despite repeated reminders not to.

In May 1996, the Cabinet directed action to be taken to prevent environmental degradation at Lojing. However, Federal agencies could not do much because land and forestry matters come under the State jurisdiction.

In August 1997, the Cabinet had ordered the Department of Environment to inform the Kelantan Government about the extent of environmental damage at the highlands.

Menteri Besar Datuk Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat responded by saying that the State Government had never issued permits for logging activities at Lojing.

The NST then visited the area and found logging and land clearing were indeed being carried out.

However, Kelantan Deputy Menteri Besar Abdul Halim Abdul Rahman said the reports, which appeared in the NST were baseless.

The Menteri Besar's Press secretary Wan Ismail Wan Jusoh had also said that the State Government had issued permits to several firms to carry out development projects in the area. They included a highland resort which would be carried out on a joint-venture basis between the State Economic Development Corporation and a private company.

In December 1997, Abdul Halim said a special committee had been formed to oversee development at Lojing. This followed a briefing to the State Government by the then DOE director-general Tan Meng Leng.

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