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`Assess impact of highland project'

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KUALA LUMPUR, Tues. - The World Wide Fund for Nature has called on the Government to assess the environmental and safety aspects of resorts, condominiums, roads and townships located in certain highland areas.

WWF director of Forests For Water (Water for Life) Programme, Dr Ramadasan Krishnan, said development in the highlands pose a serious threat to the fragile eco-system.

The unsustainable development in several areas, he said, were showing signs of soil destabilisation and if not taken seriously, could lead to natural disasters.

"A lot had been said and done regarding the haphazard development in several highland areas."

But the bottom line, he said, is that there should be more stringent enforcement.

The WWF has called for a review of the objectives of development and the environmental and safety aspects of several projects.

The latest incident affecting safety was in Tanah Rata last Saturday where a worker was buried alive and four others escaped with minor injuries when a retaining wall being built at a hillslope gave way following a downpour.

"The authorities should consider introducing a process of certification of projects to ensure credibility and accountability."

He added they should also take into account all social, physical, economic and environmental aspects.

He said almost five per cent of the greenlands in Cameron Highlands had been cleared for development and the point when the whole eco-system collapses may occur sooner than expected.

The highland eco-systems, he said, plays an important part in water supply, as the acute 1998 water shortage crisis showed.

Highland forests function as major water catchment areas, providing continuous supply of water for domestic, agricultural and other needs in the lowlands.

More than 90 per cent of Malaysia's freshwater resources originate from these densely covered forests in elevated areas.

Ramadasan said the composition of the Special Committee on highland development should also have representation from Non-Governmental Organisations and members of the public.

"This will ensure that all decisions taken by the committee were in good faith with the public's interest at heart," he added.

The committee, headed by Science, Technology and Environment Minister Datuk Law Hieng Ding, was set up at the request of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Dr Mahathir was concerned after analysis of satellite data showed that forest cover in Cameron Highlands had declined about two per cent between 1991 and this year.

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