

Tough steps to save the land

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PUTRAJAYA: In an effort to curb illegal clearing on hilly areas and slopes, the Government plans to make it a criminal offence punishable not only with hefty fines but also jail terms under the Penal Code.

The move will empower federal agencies to act on offenders and also give more powers to federal enforcement agencies as land is under the purview of state governments.

Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Seri Dr Rais Yatim said the proposal is one of several being studied by a special committee overseeing the amendments to laws governing land development – the Land Conservation Act 1960 and the National Land Code 1965.

He said there were also plans to curb the power of land administrators and any other state agencies in issuing ap-

proval for land activities and to make them legally accountable for approving development in such areas without proper environmental studies.

"Currently, the provisions of the law in this area are too weak and thus have enabled land administrators and other agencies to indiscriminately issue approvals based on their own discretion," he added after receiving Timor Leste Law Minister Dr Anna Pessoa Pinto at his office yesterday.

Dr Rais said the Cabinet was informed of the plan that would also involve the Science Technology and Environment and the Land and Co-operative Development ministries last week.

He also said the government viewed this as urgent because the provision in the Land Conservation Code that allowed land administrators or other state agencies to issue approval for land clearing or develop-

ment as open to abuse.

Another proposal being studied, he said, was to include periodical checks on projects while they were in progress to ensure that every provision of the law was adhered to.

The issue of hill-clearing activities made headlines after it was reported that a group of companies had illegally used heavy machinery to clear an 8ha plot of land, formerly part of the Blue Valley Tea Plantation, which is about 20km from Tanah Rata in Cameron Highlands.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad had expressed his sadness over "what happened in Cameron Highlands," saying the area now looked more like a flatland than a highland.

He also called for stiffer penalties, including a jail sentence, against those who disregarded environmental laws for profit.