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Cameron-Reach

HILL FLATTENING IN C' HIGHLANDS AFFECTS TNB DAM, ORANG ASLI

CAMERON HIGHLANDS, Feb 7 (Bernama) -- Land clearing for farming on a big scale in Cameron Highlands is not only damaging the environment but also disrupting Tenaga Nasional Berhad's (TNB) water reservoirs and livelihood of the Orang Asli community, an environment watch group said today.

R. Ramakrishnan, Chairman of the Regional Environmental Awareness Society of Cameron Highlands (Reach), said if hill clearings and illegal water pipe connections were not stopped immediately, TNB's hydropower dam could be affected.

He said TNB was currently paying royalty to the Kelantan Government to bring water through a 1.5km water tunnel to its reservoirs but farmers were stealing water from there for their agriculture land.

"If the company is allowed to proceed with its farming activities, where will be their water source. There is no other place except the stream in the permanent forest reserve running into the Habu reservoir," said Ramakrishnan.

He was commenting on the appeal by K.C. Kwang & Sons Sdn Bhd Director Kwang Keh Chong, developer of the controversial project near Blue Valley here, who had said that they would appeal against the ban imposed on development projects in Cameron Highlands by the Pahang Government.

Kwang had said there was no other way to clear the site than using heavy machines and maintained that their technique of hydroponics would protect the environment.

The Pahang Government, upon comments by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad that the area looked more like a flatland than a highland, had ordered an immediate freeze until existing laws, especially the Land Conservation Act 1960 were amended to allow for stiffer penalties.

Ramakrishnan said TNB's power generation would be affected as it was using the "Cascading System" which depends on water from the highland to activate its turbine downhill.

"Furthermore, if farmers are allowed to continue their activities in that area, water supply will be affected too as it will be contaminated with pesticides used for agriculture," he said.

He said even now the Orang Asli community had complained that their water supply and livelihood have been affected due to water contamination.

Ramakrishnan said Reach could not accept the claim by the developer and its consultant from Holland that their method of levelling the land would not affect the environment.

"First of all, the consultant has his own interest in the project as he is the supplier of equipment and technology. And he came from Holland where the farming there is flatland-based and not highland like here," he said.

Instead, Ramakrishnan said, the method of terrace farming system in Cameron Highlands had been proven to be successful for the past few decades and suited the environment, land and weather conditions of the area.

He said the authorities should not ease the conditions and should have confiscated all the heavy machinery used by the developer as was done by the district office previously.

"But the authorities are giving so many excuses like not enough enforcement officers. They have used army personnel to check illegal clearing of land in the past and this practice should be brought back again," he said.

Furthermore, Ramakrishnan said the district office must update its records on the farming and other development activities in the area.

In 1993, 5,192 hectares of the total area of 71,218 hectares in Cameron Highlands were developed for farming.

"But nobody knows the actual statistics now. They must update the records for better monitoring and enforcement," he said.

Ramakrishnan said the state government must set the record straight by disallowing any appeal against vast land clearance so that others would not take advantage of the relaxation in future.

He said despite the various laws already in place, weak enforcement by the authorities was the main reason for the continued illegal activities here.

"We exposed the illegal hill clearing and water stealing from the reservoir last year but nothing was done until now," he added.

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