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Jail the offenders, says PM (HL)

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PUTRAJAYA, Tues. - Those guilty of indiscriminate land-clearing and hill-cutting should be jailed as the fines imposed on such offenders at present had failed to serve as a deterrent, said Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today.

Dr Mahathir said although existing laws made land-clearing at highlands and the use of heavy machinery illegal, the culprits were clearly defiant of the law due to the low fines imposed on offenders.

"I am not certain of the exact provisions of the law now but I think that it will only be effective if there is a law where we could jail them for such offences.

"They don't seem to be bothered by the fine," Dr Mahathir said when asked about recurring large-scale and indiscriminate land-clearing in Cameron Highlands.

Asked how such incidents could recur when the officials in charge of such matters were stationed there, Dr Mahathir said the matter should be investigated to ascertain who was at fault.

"Action must be taken," he said.

He added that the Government would also look into the matter of the Department of Environment (DOE) having limited powers to act against those who indiscriminately clear land.

Under the Federal Constitution, land matters are under the purview of State Governments.

Dr Mahathir was speaking to reporters after launching the second anniversary celebration of Putrajaya's Federal Territory Day. He also officially opened the 92ha Putrajaya Botanical Garden in conjunction with the celebrations today.

Present were Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali, Putrajaya Corporation president Tan Sri Azizan Zainul Abidin, Cabinet members and foreign diplomats.

In his speech at the opening ceremony of the tropical flora and fauna park, Dr Mahathir expressed regret that hill-cutting and other land-clearing activities in Cameron Highlands had marred the famed tourist destination's reputation as a hill resort.

"We feel very sad when we see pictures in the newspaper (showing) how Cameron Highlands have been levelled with heavy machinery to the extent that it does not look like a hilly area anymore... the natural vegetation and its environment is altered.

"It looks like any other place with flat land ... all cleared. I'm sure the climate too would have changed as a result of such acts," he said.

Dr Mahathir also admonished individuals and companies which were eager to profit at the expense of the environment, disregarding the rules and regulations governing such development.

"I don't understand why you choose a hilly area for your development or any other project where you end up cutting the hill. Why not choose flat land instead, or areas which have already been cleared? Is it not more logical and environment-friendly?" the Prime Minister asked.

The New Straits Times reported last Friday that a group of companies was illegally using heavy machinery to clear an eight-hectare plot of land in an area which was formerly part of the Blue Valley Tea Plantation, near Tanah Rata.

Cameron Highlands District Officer Haron Abdul Kader told the NST that

the companies had defied two stop-work orders issued by his office for using heavy machinery and not covering the slopes they exposed.

A grader, two bulldozers and a front-loader were used for the levelling work, and soil from the levelled hill was also dumped into a small stream in the area.

Haron had also claimed that compounds of RM500 for each heavy machine used was "chicken feed" to the companies involved, which resumed their operations as soon as the enforcement officers left the area.

It was understood that the companies, engaged in vegetable farming, had bought a 24-hectare plot of land and applied for a permit to develop it for high-tech agriculture.

Kwang Ting Woon of K.C. Wong and Sons, one of the companies involved, told the NST that use of heavy machinery was justified as it was more cost-effective.

"Small machines take more time and a lot more money and we cannot afford that," he said. He also insisted that their method was "the best way, as we need flat land for our kind of agriculture".

However on Saturday, Minister of Science, Technology and Environment Datuk Seri Law Heing Deng re-issued a stop-work order and urged those concerned to lodge a police report, if necessary, to enforce the order.

On Sunday, a Pahang Land and Mines Department official lodged a report at the Cameron Highlands District police headquarters against the companies.