

Minister: Singaporean firm operating in Lojing, no EIA
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Natural Resources and Environment Minister Azmi Khalid today accused the Kelantan government of allowing a foreign company to own a large plot of land without an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) approval.

Azmi alleged that the land, some 1,200 hectares located northwest within the Lojing Highland by Sungai Belatup, is owned by three entities.

"They are the same company. They have common directors, common shareholders. The owners are foreign, from Singapore," he told a press conference in Parliament today.

The Lojing highland forest, located in the southwest of Kelantan, has been a point of contention between PAS and Umno leaders.

Both parties have blamed each other over the apparent environmental degradation of the highland, after extensive land clearing caused silt build up in rivers.

The clearing has been attributed to logging and earthworks for commercial farming and eco-tourism projects.

Tensions heightened last week when Azmi accused the PAS-led state government of issuing a gag order to state forestry officers on the clearing in Lojing.

Sultan of Kelantan Tuanku Ismail Petra had last week criticised the state government for failing to address the problem.

Following this, Deputy Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak said Lojing should be gazetted and not doing so would be a failure on the part of the state government.

Legal loophole

Meanwhile, Azmi said the Singaporean company owned the tract of land through three entities to take advantage of an apparent legal loophole.

"Each entity owns 400 hectares. Any foreign company that owns more than 500 hectares would have to carry an EIA report," he said.

He said a 20km-long dirt road has been paved leading to the undeveloped land and this has caused silt to run into Sungai Belatup.

Azmi also referred to a front page report today by Sinaran Harian, in which Kelantan executive councillor Husam Musa told Azmi "not to behave like a child" over the issue.

"The people of Kelantan and Malaysia are not childish. This is not a childish issue. As a state government, they have the moral responsibility to ensure that the environment is not destroyed to ensure future generations are not affected," said Azmi.

The minister said he had to respond or else "it would seem as though I have been quietened by such comments against me."

During the press conference, Azmi also displayed a large map of Lojing to reporters, where he indicated vast tracts of areas in the south where the land was said to be cleared.

"These areas, hundreds of acres, have been supposedly cleared for fruit and vegetable farms. But as you can see, the farms are not there. The land is laid bare," he said.

"We have asked the Kelantan government to be more proactive but they responded with this," added Azmi, pointing at the news report.

To a question whether the central government has any authority over the gazetting of land, the minister replied that it does not.

"But we can compel them to conduct environmental studies. The fines however are just RM100,000 and jail five years. Most of the time, there would be no jail. Sometimes not even the maximum fine would be issued," he said.

DOE's purview

Husam Musa and fellow ex-co Takiyuddin Hassan told reporters last week that the jurisdiction to enforce comes under the purview of the Department of Environment (DOE). He attributed the problem to a lack of enforcement, rather than logging.

"The state and local authorities have limited clout on monitoring development in the highland," he said.

He claimed that from his records, there are 21 companies involved in either applying or having started work at Lojing.

Of these, he said two had flouted regulations by starting work without the EIA report.

He said there were eight companies that had not started work as they had either deferred it or were in the process of getting an EIA.

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