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Rural folk even more hard hit by haze

SIBU: The government is appealing to local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to help rural folk here who are suffering from the impact of the thick haze blanketing the region.

Deputy Transport Minister Datuk Robert Lau Hoi Chew said longhouse and village folk were suffering much more than those in town.

"The atrocious weather condition is expected to last until early October. Besides water shortages, they have to bear with the oppressive heat and haze and they do not have the comfort of air-conditioners.

"This is the time for the NGOs to show their caring attitude by donating face masks, bottled water and others," he told reporters here yesterday.

He said the open burning to clear vegetation, especially by the big plantations in Kalimantan Borneo and Sarawak, should be properly monitored or regularised.

"Going by the haze, it seems that the pact on open burning between the governments of the two countries has not been honoured," he said, adding that this was a major contributing factor to Sibul

recording the highest Air Pollutant Index reading in the country.

According to the state department of environment, the town, as at 11am yesterday, continued to have the highest API in the country, at 187.

Lau said the situation was aggravated by local farmers doing open burning to prepare their farms for the next planting season and bush fires in many places in the outskirts.

"If possible, all plantation companies should be given a timetable when they can conduct open burning and so too the local farmers," he said.

Sibu division resident Sim Kok Kee said the government had reactivated its operations room to deal with problems faced by the people beginning today from 8am to 8pm.

Those who need help or wish to convey any message can call 012-8575747 (around the clock), 08-4338422 or fax to 084-339422.

Meanwhile, in **KUALA LUMPUR**, the Natural Resources and Environment Ministry said it will slap a compound on those involved in open burning as it contributes to unhealthy air qual-

ity and haze in the region.

Deputy Minister Tan Sri Joseph Kurup said the move was to curb widespread open burning and help solve the problem of unhealthy air quality and haze which currently affected the country.

However, he said, open burning was common practice at farms and the ministry needed time to come up with an appropriate solution.

"Such is also the practice of farms in Indonesia," he said after launching the "National Workshop of Improving Methods to Unite Concerns Over Biodiversity in Forest Management" at the Forest Research Institute Malaysia in Kepong yesterday.

In **KUCHING**, Environment and Public Health Minister Datuk Seri Wong Soon Koh said public gatherings will not be banned in Sarawak to minimise the negative impacts of the influenza A(H1N1) pandemic, haze and water shortage in the state.

"What we do now is to discourage public gatherings," he told reporters after opening the Malaysian Institute of Accountants Regional Conference 2009 here. - Bernama