

We need to stop illegal land clearing

LACK OF ENFORCEMENT: Perak government is combining resources of several agencies to crack down on culprits

PERAK Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Dr Zambry Abdul Kadir recently told a radio programme that 17,400ha of state land have been cleared illegally.

He said illegal land clearing had cost the state government millions in revenue. Although the problem is statewide, the activities are particularly prevalent in Batang Padang, Manjung and Perak Tengah districts.

The figure was based on initial findings by the state government. However, some believe that is not an actual picture of the situation, but merely the tip of the iceberg. A thorough investigation may reveal even more startling results.

Any discussion about illegal land clearing will always refer back to the massive mud flood in Sungai Bertam, Cameron Highlands, that killed three people.

It is without a doubt that illegal land-clearing activities and uncontrolled farming had led to the tragedy on Oct 23 last year. Sadly, three months after the incident, the

farmers on the highlands were back to their old tricks.

Unlike Cameron Highlands, the culprits involved in illegal land clearing in Perak are believed to be members of syndicates.

The question which begs to be answered is whether any of the syndicates have been identified, let alone their masterminds nabbed?

How much longer will they be allowed to do as they wish before the law catches up with them?

A recent operation, dubbed Op Sahom, reportedly turned tense when authorities tried to clear an illegally cultivated land in Kampar.

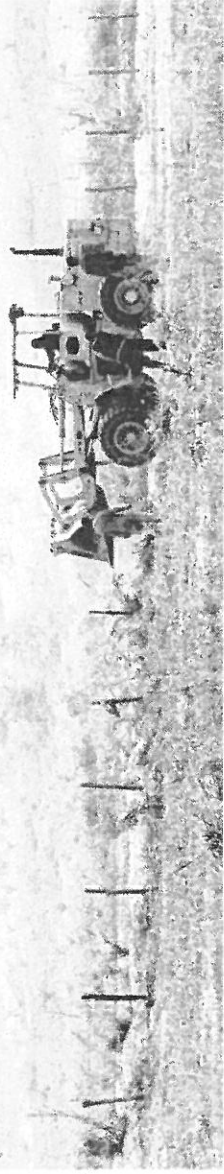
There was a stand-off between the illegal farmers and the authorities, which led to the operation being called off following political intervention.

It had been established that illegal clearing in the area was the work of a selected few individuals, who paid no heed to repeated warnings by the authorities. The farmers had encroached on the North-South Expressway land reserve, and the high-



ON THE FRONTLINE
with

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A bulldozer clearing illegally-cultivated land during Op Sahom in Kampar this month. The operation led to a stand-off with illegal farmers and was called off after political intervention. File pic

way authority had filed numerous complaints, fearing that continuous clearing would affect the structure of the highway.

Has anyone stopped to think what would happen if the highway structure gave way one fine day?

I dread to imagine what will happen. This brings us to the next question on the lack of enforcement to address the issue.

Zambry said in the radio show that the lack of mechanisms to control illegal land clearing had worsened the problem.

"I do not want to blame anyone, but the problem could have been due to weak enforcement.

"The state has combined all relevant authorities like police and the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission to keep illegal land-clearing activities in check.

"Now, the Land and Mines Department will not be alone in tackling the problem."

It does look like the state authorities have a tough job carved out for them. On one hand, they have to look after their interests, particularly to stop the rot in losing millions in revenue.

On the other, it will be a tricky issue to handle the illegal farmers and risk being labelled inhumane.

Will political intervention, as in

Op Sahom, be allowed to compromise the law?

Sticky as it may be, the issue warrants attention and an immediate and good solution must be found. If the state government resorts to populist measures, it will continue to lose millions in revenue.

But, if it chooses to act tough, the state will risk earning the wrath of hundreds, and possibly thousands, of farmers who are involved in illegal land clearing statewide.

The ball is now in the state government's court to see if it really wants to be strict in its enforcement and stop the rot once and for all.

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