

Stringent penalty for environmental damage

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PUTRAJAYA: Developers and consultants will find themselves behind bars if their projects damage the environment or trigger landslides and other disasters.

Also, environmental impact assessments (EIAs) will be compulsory for all projects, regardless of size.

These two proposals are likely to come into force when the Environmental Quality Act 1974 is amended by the end of the year.

But the million-ringgit question remains: Will these changes to the law prevent another landslide like the one in Hulu Klang last Wednesday, which left four dead?

Or will it only obscure the fact that a battery of laws provides but a partial answer to any problem. Even more important is enforcement of those laws.

Following the landslide — the fourth in this area — there was the usual finger-pointing among the Selangor State Government, the Ampang Jaya Municipal Council, and the housing developer.

The State Government blamed the developer for not building a retaining wall earlier, and council officials for not doing

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a better job of monitoring the project.

But interwoven with this blame game was the public perception of patchy enforcement of laws by the authorities, along with concern that building approvals were being granted for environmentally-sensitive areas.

Natural Resources and Environment Minister Datuk Seri Azmi Khalid said the move for a blanket EIA requirement was

necessary as many development projects, especially in high-density areas such as the Klang Valley, were below 50ha in size.

“This is also to strengthen the monitoring and implementation as well as overcome weakness (of the DOE).

“We want all projects, no matter how small, to be assessed for their environmental impact.”

Following the amendments, developers and consultants would have to bear total responsibility for any ensuing environmental problems.

Azmi said developers were at present unafraid of being hauled before the courts, as they were usually faced with RM5,000 fines for breaking any environmental law.

“The maximum fine is RM500,000, (but) they don’t mind paying the RM5,000 fine,” he said.

The minister lamented that the DOE was often blamed when things went wrong on the premise that it had approved the EIA for a project.

“As in recent cases, the DOE was largely blamed, whereas it should be the responsibility of developers and project consultants,” Azmi told reporters after briefing Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi yesterday.