

Palanivel: Riverside residents **must** move out

This is necessary for their own safety, says minister

PUTRAJAYA: Like it or not, villagers living along the riverside in Cameron Highlands will have to move out.

The reminder came from Natural Resources and Environment Minister Datuk Seri G. Palanivel, who stressed that this was necessary for their own safety.

Palanivel, who is the Cameron Highlands MP, hit out at rampant land-clearing activities for cultivation, which he said contributed to soil erosion at the popular tourist destination.

He also claimed that some villagers staying by the river had refused to be relocated to a safer location, purportedly due to convenience in accessing their economic activities.

"The Land Office probably gave them (farmers) a few acres (of land) but they overdo it (the farming)."

"Some of them are willing to

move out, some are not, but we still have to shift them because if we don't there will be disaster after disaster.

"These are all temporary land (because) nobody has given them any licence. There is no TOL (temporary operating licence) but they just *duduk* (live) there.

"That's how Cameron Highlands is – like a squatter colony," Palanivel said at a press conference after opening the International Conference on Environmental Forensics 2013, here, yesterday.

The Bertam Valley incident on Oct 23 sparked a fresh uproar over the environmental health of Cameron Highlands, where irresponsible land clearing for economic gains have been widely reported.

A major mud flood affected more

than 100 houses after water was released from the Sultan Abu Bakar Dam following a heavy downpour.

Four people were reported killed while many properties, including vehicles, were damaged.

Although it has been three weeks since the incident, Palanivel said the District and Land Office were still working on identifying a suitable location to relocate the residents.

"Meanwhile, we are already clearing trash from the river with a RM100,000 allocation to do this," Palanivel said, adding that the RM40mil project to widen and deepen Sungai Bertam would begin after all those living by its banks were relocated.

Agricultural exports from Cameron Highlands amounts to some RM2bil per annum, he added.

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Risky riverside: The remains of homes washed away by the recent mud flood along the Bertam River in Cameron Highlands. — Bernama