

Syndicate hinders logging probe

EVIDENCE:

Terengganu Forestry Dept enlists help of police, GoF to stop illegal logging

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AN illegal logging syndicate is having a firm grip on loader operators in Besut and the southern districts of Kelantan, making it difficult for the Forestry Department to present evidence in court.

Their failure to cooperate has forced the department to report the problem to the National Security Council to stop illegal logging.

State Forestry director Azmi Nordin said the department was also enlisting the help of the police and the General Operations Force (GoF) personnel, who are armed with M-16 rifles.

"The syndicate is well organised.

We are narrowing in on its leader, members and those working with them," Azmi told the *New Straits Times*.

"During a raid on the Pelagat forest reserve near Jertih in Besut on July 22, our men and GoF personnel entered the area from three points at 2am and walked in the dark for six hours to reach the illegal logging camp.

"When they arrived at the site, no one was there, but we found an excavator and an abandoned bulldozer. The men also found 100 *meranti* logs worth more than RM500,000.

"One of the logs had a diameter measuring 101cm, which means that it was extracted from a forest reserve.

"Further inspection revealed that all the trees along a 40m buffer zone at Sungai Pelagat in the forest reserve have been felled.

"The buffer zone is to protect the river from heavy sedimentation and to prevent flooding at the lower reaches of the river. With the protection gone, a prolonged downpour during the monsoon can lead to swelling of the river and flooding. This is a serious matter,



Logs and an excavator were seized during a raid on the Pelagat forest reserve, near Jertih, on Friday. Pic courtesy of Terengganu Forestry Department

but the illegal loggers could not care less if their activities disturb the environment and lead to the loss of life and property," said Azmi.

He said the department also made a verification check on the status of a group land development scheme (RTB) and found out that the application for 200 RTB lots, each measuring about 0.8ha, had

yet to be approved.

"The RTB area was once a forest reserve and adjacent to the buffer zone at Sungai Pelagat.

"It is illegal to clear the forest for fruit farming or any other development without approval from the authorities.

"The illegal loggers have cleared not only the RTB area that has yet to be gazetted but also the trees in

the buffer zone.

"We will monitor the forest reserve to ensure no further encroachment takes place."

The officers found a bungalow in the area, which was rented by illegal loggers, but was abandoned following the raid.

"We want to find out if the owner of the bungalow is part of the syndicate," said Azmi

EXCLUSIVE