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Selangor government drops plan to raze Malaysia forest reserve after uproar

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Selangor's state government caused an uproar when it revealed it was allowing parts of the 8,000-year-old North Kuala Langat forest to be developed.

KUALA LUMPUR - The Selangor state government, which is controlled by the Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition, has scrapped plans to develop part of a forest reserve following widespread opposition from Malaysia's indigenous Orang Asli community, environmentalists and lawmakers from both sides of the political divide.

The state government caused an uproar when it revealed on Aug 30 that it had in May degazetted 536.7ha of a 931ha forest reserve in Kuala Langat district for a mixed commercial development by a private company. The affected area is slightly larger than Singapore's Sentosa Island.

The state government had defended its decision to allow parts of the 8,000-year-old North Kuala Langat forest to be developed, saying that it had designated other land parcels in Selangor as replacement areas for the degazetted forest.

However, in a sudden U-turn on Wednesday (Sept 8), it said it would begin regazetting the forest reserve, but insisted that the earlier degazettement process had been done in accordance with the law.

"The state government will stop the proposed development plan for the area and cancel the move to give ownership of the land to the company involved," said Selangor Menteri Besar Amirudin Shari in a statement on Wednesday.

"In relation to that, the Selangor state government will begin the process to regazette the North Kuala Langat forest reserve," he added.

The decision to allow the forest reserve to be developed had come under fire from politicians within PH, which is a federal opposition coalition, as well as those in the federal government.

During the controversy, it emerged that the proposed right to develop the land had been handed over from a company owned by Selangor's Sultan Sharafuddin Idris Shah and his son to another company, called Gabungan Indah.

Reports have said that Gabungan Indah is a little-known company set up in November last year with a nominal paid-up capital of RM1 (30 Singapore cents). Its sole director is Mr Mohd Fadil Muskon, formerly Youth chief of the Johor branch of Umno, Malaysia's largest political party.

The company is purportedly linked to developers Perdana Parkcity, the property arm of the Sarawak-based timber giant Samling Group.

Last Saturday, the Selangor Crown Prince, Tengku Amir Shah, denied that he had any links to the project and claimed to be concerned about the environment, and how development impacts climate change.

"Forest areas, particularly peat swamp forests, play a vital role as carbon sinks to keep our planet cool and to slow down the rate of global warming. They also remain home to rare flora and fauna and their loss further risks diminishing our biodiversity," he was quoted as saying by the Bernama news agency.

Environmentalists say removing the 931ha peatland forest reserve from the protected list will displace more than 2,000 Orang Asli and critically endangered species such as the Malayan sun bear. Mr Amirudin defended the plan in the past by alleging that 40 per cent of the area is degraded forest and frequently catches fire.

But experts warned that the forest is important for climate control as peatland acts as a natural carbon store.

The Orang Asli community, who roam and forage in the land, said it is a source of livelihood for them.

Source:<https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/selangor-government-drops-plan-to-raze-forest-reserve-after-uproar>