



Land-clearing being carried out by a landowner who was given permission by the Cameron Highlands land office soon after the Bukit Antarabangsa tragedy. — Picture courtesy of REACH

Highland raped, RM500 fine

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CAMERON HIGHLANDS: The permit issued to a landowner by the Cameron Highlands' land office last December stated that no heavy machinery was to be used to remove earth during land-clearing activities on his land in Kampung Raja here.

It also stipulated that the landowner must ensure that silt traps and proper drainage were installed to avoid earth from flowing into a nearby water source and onto the Kampung Raja-Tanah Rata road.

But the permit did not contain order for the landowner not to touch slopes of more than 25 degrees gradient, in

accordance with the 2002 Cabinet Guidelines on Highlands and Islands' Development.

The landowner broke almost every rule. He used a bulldozer and tractor to remove earth, did not construct silt traps or drains and attacked the steep slopes with gusto.

And, what was the punishment he got for disregarding the law and the environment?

His permit was revoked by the district land office and he was slapped with a fine of less than RM500. He can even make a fresh application for the same permit and continue the land-clearing activities.

Regional Environmental Awareness of Cameron High-

lands (REACH) president R. Ramakrishnan is aghast.

"This latest episode of blatant violation of laws and rules shows how important it is to re-visit the guidelines to make them more effective," he told the *New Straits Times* yesterday.

"This incident should be enough to persuade the government to relook its own guidelines and introduce a new enforcement mechanism."

He said REACH had always believed that the guidelines were not adequate in ensuring compliance with environmental needs on the highlands.

"What Cameron Highlands, and other hillsides like Bukit Antarabangsa, need are effec-

tive laws which ensure culprits are penalised severely for damaging the environment."

Ramakrishnan, who has been instrumental in highlighting the continuous "rape" of the highland since the inception of REACH in 2000, said the district office was to be blamed for giving permission to the landowner to clear hillsides.

He also pointed out that this particular landowner was issued the permit just days after the latest Bukit Antarabangsa tragedy on Dec 6.

"To make it worse, the land-clearing permit did not state that hills with steep gradients are not to be touched. What is wrong with the land office?

Why did it allow this to take place?"

He alleged that the guidelines were being sidelined by the land office when issuing permits for land-clearing or earthwork.

Ramakrishnan accused the Drainage and Irrigation Department and the Department of Environment of being "toothless" in stopping the land office from issuing such permits.

"No one gives two hoots about the guidelines anymore. It is there on paper but it is not being enforced.

"The time has come for the government to once again intervene to stop further degradation of Cameron Highlands. Only this time, we need laws not more guidelines."