

Home Ministry cans commercialising ketum, says cons outweigh pros

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Thursday August 4, 2016 03:45 PM

UPDATED: August 04, 2016 04:23 PM



Datuk Seri Ahmad Zahid Hamidi says the Home Ministry will not allow the commercial cultivation of ketum for export as proposed by Risda. — Picture by Saw Siow Feng

KUALA LUMPUR, August 4 — The Home Ministry will not allow the commercial cultivation of ketum for export as proposed by the Rubber Industries Smallholders Development Authority (Risda), Datuk Seri Ahmad Zahid Hamidi said today.

The home minister said the decision was made after a recent briefing by experts from the Ministry of Health and police officers from the narcotics department who showed the plants do more harm than good.

“So we want Risda to end the polemic on ketum immediately,” Zahid, who is also the deputy prime minister, told reporters after attending Media Prima’s Aidilfitri open house celebration here.

“Yes there is scientific proof that the ketum leaves have some positive properties, but there are evidence to show that the negative properties outweigh the good”, he said.

Among the concern was that ketum could be addictive, he added. “So the MOH and KDN decided against the commercialisation of ketum plants, and especially the idea of exporting it,” he said, referring to the Health and Home Ministries.

But Zahid said the government would allow ketum to be used for research purposes. Earlier today, Rural and Regional Development Minister Datuk Seri Ismail Sabri Yaakob also said his ministry is against ketum commercialisation for similar reasons.

Sabri added that his ministry had considered the government's plans to eventually place ketum under the Dangerous Drugs Act 1952, adding that it would not be wise to venture into commercialising ketum now given the possibility that it may be classified as a narcotic.

Risda earlier this week said more than 530,000 rubber smallholders nationwide stand to reap a four-figure income if the government approves the planting of ketum trees, and presented its findings to the minister today.

The abuse of ketum is prohibited under Section 30(3) of the Poisons Act 1952 that allows for a maximum fine of RM10,000, or imprisonment of up to four years, but offenders are reportedly generally only fined.

The Health Ministry last year withdrew the Bill to amend the Dangerous Drugs Act to include ketum leaves in Parliament, following objections of fear that it would victimise villagers, leaving the Bill in the hands of the Home Ministry for further action.

Last November, Deputy Home Minister Datuk Nur Jazlan Mohamed said the Bill's definition of ketum leaves was being fine-tuned, and expected to be tabled sometime this year.