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Bill likely to be tabled in Parliament next year

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**KUALA LUMPUR:** The Bill to criminalise the sale, possession, consumption and planting of ketum is expected to be tabled in Parliament next year, said the Health Ministry.

Deputy Minister Datuk Seri Dr Hilmi Yahaya said the ministry was discussing the proposed amendments to the Poisons Act 1952 (revised 1989) with the Attorney-General (A-G).

He said the Bill would likely be brought up next year since the Dewan Rakyat meeting next month will focus on Budget 2018 that will be tabled by the Prime Minister.

"The amendments to the Act will involve a total ban on ketum. No more planting (of ketum trees), drinking (the juice) and selling or keeping ketum leaves," Dr Hilmi said.

On whether the ministry will offer a grace period before imposing the changes, he said this would depend on the discussion with the A-G.

Yesterday, *The Star* frontpaged a report that the authorities intend to amend the law to impose heavier penalties on offenders to rein in ketum abuse.

The move will include increasing fines ten-fold and adding jail time.

It was also reported that more than 14,000 people have been arrested nationwide for ketum abuse in the past two years.

Dr Hilmi said that while the ministry had attempted to list ketum under the Dangerous Drugs Act in the past, many MPs had opposed the move, claiming that it was too severe.

Experts have lauded the Government's efforts to ban ketum.

Malaysia Crime Prevention Foundation senior vice-chairman Tan Sri Lee Lam Thye called on the Government to conduct a thorough study on the impact of ketum abuse in view of the high number of people arrested for the offence.

He said that developed nations such as the United States were also facing a dilemma in addressing ketum abuse.

"In August last year, the US Drug Enforcement Agency announced its intent to ban ketum, also called kratom.

"Ketum is to be placed in the most restrictive classification of drugs, alongside heroin, marijuana and LSD," he said.

Lee said Malaysia has to accept that ketum abuse was rampant in the country and that firm action must be taken to keep people from getting addicted to it.

"Although some groups claim that stern action would victimise villagers who plant ketum trees to use the leaves in traditional remedies, I believe the Government can help them shift to other crops that won't harm anyone," he said.

Retired pharmaceutical chemistry Prof Dr Zhari Ismail, who has done studies on the characterisation of local ketum, said the move to ban it was good, seeing that Malaysia has "an overwhelming problem" with drug abuse.

"Ketum should be categorised as a dangerous drug, like marijuana. Both have similar risks; unregulated use can endanger health and well being," he said.

While ketum in low doses can be used to treat depression and relieve pain, he said it does more harm than good because it can lead to addiction.