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10 nabbed for illegal online trading of wildlife

PETALING JAYA: A total of 126 suspects have been identified and 10 people arrested for their involvement in cybercrimes related to the trading of protected wildlife this year, said Water, Land and Natural Resources Minister Datuk Dr Xavier Jayakumar.

He said as of November, the Wildlife and National Parks Department (Perhilitan) had also received 167 complaints of such cybercrimes and carried out 10 special operations.

Perhilitan, he added, also received an average of 140 complaints a year on illegal online trading, which required immediate action.

"The department views seriously the sale of wildlife without licences and special permits on social media.

"It's a wildlife crime that has to be curbed.

"Perhilitan will continue to monitor cybercrimes," he added.

He was responding to an exclusive report by *The Star* detailing the existence of a private Facebook group and WhatsApp group illegally selling protected wildlife and animal parts, including radiated tortoises, tapir skulls, elephant tusks, tiger teeth and pangolins.

Membership in these groups is by invitation only. And due to Facebook's privacy settings, the group cannot be tracked via its search bar.

Dr Xavier admitted that among the challenges faced by Perhilitan were the existence of such "private and restricted" accounts, with transactions limited to only regis-

tered members, as well as the difficulties in tracing the links or networks offering these transactions.

"There are many transactions which are spams," he said, adding that it was also difficult to trace the real account owner.

"The offer and sale only takes place via private messaging," he said.

Based on the latest pattern in Illegal Wildlife Trade (IWT) in Malaysia, he said social media platforms were being used to sell wildlife, especially as pets.

"The transactions between hunters, suppliers, middlemen, sellers and buyers are via private messages.

"Perhilitan has discussed this with the administrators behind the social media platforms.

"However, the policy of multi-companies in not cooperating by giving personal information makes it difficult for our enforcement officers to track these criminals down," he said.

He said measures taken by Perhilitan to curb such cybercrimes were enforcement operations, cooperation with international agencies like Interpol in operations like Ops Dragon, Ops Chameleon, Ops Thunderstorm and Ops Thunderball.

Others include strengthening the Wildlife Crime Unit in Perhilitan, enhancing operations at the country's 14 exit and entry points, regional and border cooperation and the setting up of the Intelligence and Tactical Command Centre for Wildlife Crime.

He said an additional clause was also being included in the amendments to the Wildlife Conservation Act to ban promotional activities for the online sale of wildlife without valid licences.

