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Power-Blackout (Commentary)

IT BOILS DOWN TO A PRIMITIVE POWER TRANSMISSION SYSTEM

By: Azman Ujang

KUALA LUMPUR, Aug 5 (Bernama) -- Malaysia, for all its sophistication, is still equipped with a power transmission system that is, at best, primitive.

This once again became obvious on Saturday when a power failure paralysed the whole of Peninsular Malaysia, causing untold disruptions and damage that are yet to be fairly assessed.

It would be naive for Energy, Telecommunications and Posts Minister Datuk Leo Moggie, who came out to explain the reasons for the massive blackout last night, to think that the people are convinced by the explanation.

Consumers are just not interested to know how it happened. Of course, something must have happened to trigger the transmission failure.

What people want to know is why after all these years of modern electricity development, where no efforts and money are spared, the transmission system is still so pathetic that a malfunction in the switchgear could cripple the entire peninsula.

Analysts said no significant improvements in the transmission services provided by the TNB could be detected since the last major blackout in the peninsula in 1992 which was caused by a lightning strike.

That TNB still sees it fit to allow mainland Malaysia to be at the mercy of such a fragile transmission system is a serious management failure, they said.

It is also hard for the consumers to be convinced by Leo Moggie's statement that since the 1992 blackout, "recommendations" from some British consultants have been implemented.

One might ask, if these recommendations were genuinely to address what occurred in 1992, why did it happen again, and even on a bigger scale?

And this time, Leo Moggie again is in the mood to appoint yet more foreign consultants.

He would, at Wednesday's Cabinet meeting, recommend the appointment of foreign independent consultants "for advice".

TNB itself has hundreds of highly trained engineers who are so familiar with Malaysia's National Grid transmission system -- which has given problems in the past -- that if they are professional enough, they would have been able to address this problem without waiting for another catastrophic blackout.

This is exactly the point which Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad was driving at yesterday when he took to task the TNB management.

It was undoubtedly the harshest criticism he has ever made against a government agency in the 15 years that he has been Prime Minister -- and one that should be enough to rock some senses in the boardroom of TNB under the leadership of Tan Sri Ani Arope.

Ani is of course one of the finest gentlemen to run an important organisation in the country, but perhaps it is time for him not to lament too much about the existence of the Independent Power Producers (IPPs) eating into TNB profits, and instead to put his own house in order in terms of an infallible transmission system.

Malaysia, with the construction of the 2,400 megawatts Bakun hydro-electricity dam, just cannot afford such an unreliable transmission system as we are having now.

"If any new system is necessary to tackle the kind of blackout that we

are having, so be it," said a corporate analyst.

There seems to be no love lost between some TNB executives and the IPPs.

As one of them told Bernama: "Previously, we used to eat only one plate of rice. Now with the IPPs, we are forced to eat three plates of rice."

The analysts also said that Leo Moggie should also crack the whip on the TNB as the stakes are too high for any weaknesses in the system to be allowed to wait for another lightning strike or a switchgear malfunction.

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