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Bukit Bintang - development gone awry

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SOMETHING is dangerously wrong when it takes the Prime Minister's strongest admonition before a city street is cleaned. This, unfortunately, was the case with Jalan Bukit Bintang in Kuala Lumpur.

One does not have to be a regular visitor to Jalan Bukit Bintang to realise the many things that have gone awry with the development of the city's famous quarter in recent years.

The rubbish-strewn streets and pavements, which irked Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad a week ago, is only one of the problems facing the Bukit Bintang area.

At a certain time of the day and on certain days of the week, Jalan Bukit Bintang is almost impassable. This has worsened in recent weeks by the partial closure of a section of Jalan Sultan Ismail for the monorail construction.

Despite the monorail, the future does not hold too much promise for traffic-clogged Bukit Bintang area. With areas along nearby Jalan Bukit Ceylon, Jalan Sultan Ismail and Jalan Imbi being opened for large-scale high-density developments, the traffic problem could worsen.

In the last two decades or so, Bukit Bintang has been transformed from a run-down city section into a high-class shopping, hotel and entertainment enclave. This orgy of transformation gives little or no attention to traffic flow and other problems associated with high-density developments. It is now paying the price for laissez-faire development.

Landscaping does not exist except for a row of trees between the Jalan Bukit Bintang-Jalan Sultan Ismail junction and the Regent Hotel. Even that is only one side of the road. More trees were cut down to give way to development than were planted.

It is here that shoppers and pedestrians congregate for a respite. Of course, among the thousands who pass by or stop under these trees, some are not civic-minded and do not care much about littering.

The real problem, however, lies with the hawkers. By selling take-away food and drinks, they encourage littering.

To this is added the problem of poor street cleaning and rubbish collection. It is nothing new to see garbage piling up in the back lanes and streets strewn with litter during weekends and public holidays when street sweepers and garbage collectors either take leave or go missing for lack of supervision.

But streets and pavements are not the only public utilities left unmaintained or badly maintained during weekends and public holidays. Water and electricity supply, the telephones, traffic lights, lifts and escalators too tend to go out of commission during weekends and public holidays. The longer the holidays, the worse the breakdown.

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TYPICAL of bureaucracy, Kuala Lumpur City Hall, in reacting to the Prime Minister's admonition, summoned an emergency meeting while top officials called for tightening of the law.

But it is not the law that is at fault. In fact, due to our penchant for enacting laws each time there is a problem, our statute book has grown so thick that it takes a genius to remember what we have in it. We seem incapable of using common sense.

Common sense tells us what is lacking is not rules and regulations, plans and programmes, campaigns and publicity on cleanliness but

implementation and enforcement. We spend too much time enacting laws and not enough time enforcing them.

This reminds me of a conversation I had with a retired senior police officer who once held the post of director at the Federal police headquarters in Bukit Aman.

He said law enforcement was very often hampered by the inability of enforcement officers, including policemen, to make a distinction between their private lives and law enforcement.

He said: "When a low-ranking policeman is forced to live in a squatter area, he picks up the habits and practices common to such a place. At the very least he becomes immune to them.

"For his safety and the safety of his family, he will look the other way when offences like dadah trafficking and riding motorcycles without crash helmets are committed.

"He hears the plight of prostitutes and hawkers. So, when the time comes for him to use the law against these people, the element of sympathy gets in the way. If possible, he will not act against them. But if he is an unscrupulous person, he will use his position to exact bribes."

The same may apply to other law enforcement officers. If a low-ranking City Hall enforcement officer lives in a crowded City Hall flat, he may become immune to all the bad things happening in such an area.

So, apart from a good piece of legislation, we need a good set of law enforcement agencies.

Let us see how long this "hangat-hangat tahi ayam" (temporary enthusiasm) on the part of City Hall will last.

On the part of individuals, there seems to be the notion that if others are going to dirty public toilets and litter the streets, why should they take the trouble to keep them clean.

This line of thinking seems to cut very deep into the Malaysian psyche that it sometimes carries racial or ethnic connotation. It is ironic that as we become more educated, wealthier and sophisticated, the sense of civic-mindedness among some people tends to wither. They suffer a split personality.

While the toilets in their homes are so clean that they are good enough to sleep in, these people have no qualms about dirtying public toilets.

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WHILE some Islamic religious officials saw great evil in a few teenage Muslim girls taking part in a beauty contest and sprung into action with gusto, fathers who raped their children and others, husbands who beat up their wives and the army of Muslim dadah addicts seemed to have escaped their attention.

Now that a decision had been taken that State Islamic Religious Affairs Departments should go after Muslim fathers who raped their daughters and others, husbands who battered their wives and the youths who fell victim to dadah addiction, it is hoped that the image of Islam, a religion of peace and caring, is restored.

Of course, this is not going to be easy. Already the Government and its Muslim leaders have been resoundingly condemned in Friday sermons and at other religious and political functions for condemning the arrest of three Muslim beauty contestants by the Selangor Religious Affairs Department.

Dr Mahathir is taking a great risk when he said the departments should give priority to the bigger problems facing Muslims rather than the way people dress.

I hope he can really count on the Menteri Besar and Muslim Chief Ministers to support the decision by reining in their religious officials. After all, as Dr Mahathir told the Press last Saturday, the new focus was agreed upon in a meeting between him and the Muslim Menteri Besar and

Chief Ministers two days earlier.

The greatest disfavour the Menteri Besar and Chief Ministers can do to the Prime Minister is to politicise the decision for political gain. They should instead get down to work to redirect and discipline their religious officials.

In the same context, while it is too early to gauge how the proposal by Kedah Menteri Besar Tan Sri Sanusi Junid, to make Muslim wives the sole and rightful owners of their houses if they are divorced will go down with religious experts, certainly making sure they are not thrown out of the house is a fair thing to do.

Although Sanusi's proposal to include the provision in the State Syariah laws will, for a start, be confined to low-cost houses, his initiative is applauded.

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SOME very serious questions concerning the handling by the Health Ministry of the recent viral outbreak that took the lives of 30 children in Sarawak and infected hundreds of others throughout the country have to be asked now that the disease has been brought under control.

It is worrisome that after more than three months since the disease was detected in Sibu, the cause of death remains a mystery. Speaking to the Press after chairing a clinical pathology meeting in Kuching at the end of last month, Health Minister Datuk Chua Jui Meng said there had yet to be any proof of the causative agent in the fatalities.

"We are not prepared to say definitely what was or were the viruses which caused the deaths. But what is sure is that it was caused by a family of enteroviruses," he said.

Chua said laboratory tests done in Japan and the US and Malaysia, including by the World Health Organisation and Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, had detected the enterovirus 71.

Some 3,800 samples were taken for clinical analyses and traces of Coxsackie B 1 and 16, which caused the hand-foot-mouth disease, were found in some of them, said Chua.

At the height of the outbreak, doubts were expressed on the manner the ministry was handling the crisis. But these were not highlighted in order to allow the ministry and related organisations to put their act together as well as to avoid causing panic.

What was disturbing was the conflicting reports and statements regarding the disease and extent of its seriousness.

While the public was being assured that the disease was under control, many well-to-do parents were being advised by the same people to take their young children abroad. It seemed confining them to the house in Malaysia was not safe enough.

With the country facing imminent danger of being revisited by diseases it once brought under control and invaded by new strains of killer viruses brought in by immigrants and travellers, the manner in which the ministry handled the Coxsackie outbreak does not provide great comfort.

Perhaps, Chua may want to re-evaluate the preparedness of his ministry and related agencies in facing these new threats. There appears to be a weakness in crisis management and in finding long-term solutions to controlling the spread of communicable diseases.

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