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DIRTY CULTURE MAKES PEOPLE NO CLASS, ENVIRONMENT POLLUTED

Bernama Feature

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KUALA LUMPUR: Whether it is dirty culture that makes a people dirty or a dirty people that makes a culture dirty, the way of living of an average Malaysian shows that he has no class.

Spitting everywhere they like, sneezing into other people's faces, littering or emptying their garbage into the drains and waterways, these certainly do not bespeak of good breeding or a cultured society.

Tourists may know us as "fascinating Malaysia", foreign investors may look upon us as "industrialising Malaysia", and Third World countries probably think of us as "progressive Malaysia".

But the truth of the matter is that there is an ugly side of Malaysia that we take great care not to project to the outside world but which we all know exists nonetheless: "Dirty Malaysia."

Tonnes of rotting uncollected garbage stinking to high heaven, drains and rivers choking with rubbish and waste, littered streets and dirty eateries and coffee-shops -- all these make one wonder where has common sense or hygiene gone to?.

What happened to the education that almost all Malaysians received?

Malaysians also also poison the very air they breathe through vehicular and other smoke emissions and contaminate the very water they drink through indiscriminate discharge of toxic effluents into the country's waterways.

Evidence of the dirty habits of Malaysians can be found everywhere. Garbage is strewn indiscriminately at squatter settlements, housing estates and backlanes of imposing buildings. Even the "Do Not Litter, Fine RM500" signboards are not respected - rubbish can be seen piled up around them, as if deposited there as an act of defiance.

Food stalls operate next to smelly drains or overflowing garbage dumps and the irony is that the customers seem to enjoy their food even more, sharing their cendol, rojak, char koay teow or yong tau foo with the swarms of flies.

Statistics of the consequences of the dirty culture paint an alarming picture. Over the past two years, there was a rise of 35 percent food poisoning cases in the country to 2,500.

Even hospitals are not spared. Last March, 35 hospital staff of Hospital Tengku Ampuan Rahimah in Klang, including three doctors, came down with food poisoning.

The various clean-up operations also appear to be a losing battle. For the first eight months of last year, Kuala Lumpur City Hall (DBKL) collected fines totalling over RM6 million for littering, the same amount as that collected for the whole of 1995.

But it poured back more than 17 times that amount - over RM104 million - last year just to keep a semblance of cleanliness in the city that is being dirtied daily by many of the 36,500 petty hawkers/traders as well as the public.

The Department of Irrigation and Drainage (DID) is also fighting a losing battle, removing 20,000 tonnes of solid waste and rubbish, equivalent to 13,334 lorryloads, from the Klang river every year. When can the department stop and say their job is done?

According to the Agriculture Ministry reports, the quality of riverwater in Malaysia showed a decline from 1987 to 1995. The percentage of polluted rivers increased from three to 12 per cent with the culprits being domestic waste products, effluence from animal farms and industries,

and sedimentation of rivers caused by soil erosion from uncontrolled land development.

About 2,250 industrial sources have been identified as generating hazardous waste and recent Department of Environment (DOE) statistics showed that some 630 tonnes of such waste are generated annually.

Malaysia produces about 300,000 tonnes of industrial waste annually, most of which are toxic.

In air pollution, the principal sources are vehicle emission - said to account for about 50 percent of air pollution in the country - and industries as well as open burning, whether of garbage or vegetation during land clearing work.

While the introduction of unleaded gasoline has taken lead, which poisons the human nervous system, out of the vehicle exhaust emission, other harmful gases like carbon dioxide and monoxide, and oxides of sulphur and nitrogen remain.

Unfortunately, all this smoke from the three sources does not simply disappear into thin air. They return to haunt us, whether in the form of acid rain which has been on the rise since monitoring started in the mid 1980s or haze, which has enveloped parts of the country for extended periods, first in 1982 and again in the 1990s.

These uncaring lifestyle seems to persist while the country is developing and changing. This means that the Malaysian culture or attitude has not changed for the better despite the fact that literacy rate is more than 80 percent, signifying an educated population.

Civic consciousness, personal hygiene, regard for cleanliness and the preservation of a healthy environment have obviously remain at a deplorably low level.

DID Deputy Director-General (I), Keizrul Abdullah says the public's "couldn't-be-bothered" attitude towards cleanliness and the non-biodegradable nature of plastic objects, is threatening to clog many of the country's waterways.

His department together with local councils has started a "Bins on Wheels Programme" whereby portable bins are placed in squatter areas for the disposal of rubbish. "This is part of the department's 10-year clean-up the Klang River campaign which includes beautifying the banks and desilting certain parts of the river," he adds.

The DOE says pollution complaints received by the department have risen sharply to 2,758 cases in 1995, an increase of 40 percent from 1994's figure. As in previous years, air pollution complaints outweigh all other complaints, with the highest number due to wood-based industries followed by non-industrial sources.

According to its Deputy Director-General, Rosnani Ibrahim, rivers are the worst-affected pollution sector in the country. In 1995, the DOE issued 2,149 compounds for various pollution offences, an increase of 78 percent from the previous year.

As a renewed effort to combat smoke emission from diesel-powered vehicles in urban centres where pollution level is rapidly rising, an enforcement programme codenamed "AWASI (Area Watch and Sanction Inspection) was launched in Kuala Lumpur to focus attention on high mileage vehicles.

"Under this programme, excessively smoky vehicles are summoned and issued detention orders as well as prohibited from further operation until they are repaired and the problem rectified with the technical assistance of selected co-operating workshops," Rohani explains.

Dr Nasir Hassan, a lecturer from the Faculty of Science and Environmental Studies at Universiti Putra Malaysia, says Malaysians should follow the example of the Japanese in inculcating cleanliness in their daily life.

"It took the Japanese 15 years of cultural revolution to transform themselves into a clean society that they are today. To them, throwing rubbish everywhere is a sin. Concerted efforts from the pre-school level, department and governmental agencies and the whole community, as well as clear guidelines and policies backed by strict enforcement, help keep Japan clean," he states.

"We can adopt Japan's cultural revolution, but we have to review the results every five years. Not only is Japan clean, but it also has installation of proper equipment, no dumping site, clean rivers, incinerations and recycling centres, even at primary schools."

Dr Nasir, who specialises in garbage studies, feels Malaysia's school curriculum needs to be restructured with greater emphasis given to cultivating love for cleanliness and preservation of the environment among schoolchildren.

R. Senthirajah, president of the Environmental Protection Society of Malaysia (EPSM) and Prof Mohd Hamdan Adnan, president of the Federation of Malaysian Consumers Association (FOMCA), also believe where cleanliness is concerned, it is better to catch them young at school.

Nobody is more concerned over the dirty Malaysian culture than the Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who had spoken out about it time and again. He had at one time said that it could be that the average Malaysian has no class, hanging his or her underwears for all to see.

"We are a middle-income country and our status is better now, but our lifestyle is still unchanged from that of a backward and poor country," he said over the weekend.

At another time, he quoted an Arab saying to show his point, that if everybody were to keep the road in front of his house clean, then the whole street, kampung, town, city and country would be clean! -- Bernama

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