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Only strict enforcement will ensure cleanliness

Rama Prabha

FOR the last few days, I couldn't help but notice the word "cleanliness" in the media. Some remarks by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad seem to have sparked off opinions and proposals from the authorities.

With such an outcry, I too feel compelled to share my views.

Actually, I am amazed at the sudden attention given to cleanliness. Apparently, as Malaysians, we could not have missed those clogged drains. And most of us must have caught a glimpse of the food wrappers, plastic bags and cigarette butts which tend to "grow" at roadsides, pavements, beaches, waterfalls - some even "creep out" of dustbins to peek at daylight.

But the most well-kept "treasures" are those backyards where disease-bearing cockroaches, mice, flies and stray animals live in perfect harmony, and not to mention the foul smell and rotting food.

The irony is, in a climate with such heavy discussions focused on curbing littering, proposals brought up remain as proposals ever - the litterbug T-shirts, community work, hefty fines, gotong-royong, suspension of private contractors who failed to carry out garbage collection properly, etc.

Viewing this list, does it offer a glimpse of hope for a cleaner Malaysia? Definitely not, because similar legislation has been implemented for years now.

When I moved into my housing estate, the main junction carried a warning sign of a RM500 fine for those caught littering. Thirteen years have passed and every single day, rubbish trails are left where food stalls operated earlier in the day, the main drains are so filled up with garbage that water has been stagnant, and the backyards of the houses host stray animals.

The business premises opposite toss their crates and boxes and other rubbish conveniently on the sidewalks and by the roadside. Of course, the picture isn't perfect without small-minded neighbours setting alight heaps of paper, styrofoam and household rubbish at the shady mini parks in front of our house.

With such couldn't-care-less attitude, it is hard to drive home the message on cleanliness.

It is more ridiculous for the Education Ministry to get schoolchildren to scrub drains and pick up rubbish around the school compound; this decision has provoked contempt as the measures are clearly temporary.

The root of the problem is with the lazy grown-ups. A fine of RM1,000 could mean a month's salary, alternatively, a week's jail would be sheer humiliation.

Again, it's worrying to think about the dire consequences of such filth and dirt when hundreds of new housing projects are given approvals.

How then would the authorities keep tabs on the municipal councils or the contractors with regard to their daily task now that the areas have expanded a few folds if they can't handle the existing ones?

The idea of litterbug T-shirts and community service strikes me as a joke fit for a comic strip rather than a serious measure to tackle the problem because it's not feasible to engage a few personnel to drag the litterbug to a specific spot, make him or her wear the T-shirt, supervise him or her doing the clean-up, only to end up doing a second round of

cleaning as litterbugs would not have a clear concept on what constitutes cleanliness.

Heavy fines or jail terms may seem inhuman, but they are not at all unreasonable.

So, let's start with enforcement. People who are forced to keep their neighbourhood clean would instil the habit in the younger generation.

Being adapted to a clean and tidy environment, a child who starts schooling would have learnt how to maintain cleanliness and tidiness.

For teenagers, the authorities have to promote clean images of cool hangouts such as gardens, malls, theme parks and nature sites, portraying young, hip and trendy people practising cleanliness, health and hygiene as the "in thing".

The different approach for different strata of society will determine whether the illegal dumpsites will greet foreign tourists attending the Commonwealth Games next year and give them the impression that we are a nation of people who can't clean our own backyards.

Anyway, we are not cleaning up for the foreigners or others. It's for our own quality of life, it's a dream of our own.