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Prosper thy neighbour policy in action

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`CAN we afford it? Where are we going to get the money? Why us?' THESE are some of the questions that came to mind upon hearing that Malaysia was offering Indonesia US\$1 billion (RM3.4 billion) to help overcome its financial woes.

Having asked them, let me qualify that the intention is not to question the wisdom of the decision but to understand what is at stake.

Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, who is also Finance Minister, was quoted by AFP as saying in Jakarta on Monday that Malaysia was prepared to provide US\$1 billion to a joint fund to help Indonesia revive its economy.

According to the Western news agency, Anwar made the announcement after paying an unannounced visit to President Suharto. Perhaps because the visit was unannounced, we have to hear about it from a foreign news agency.

So much for our "distrust" of the foreign media. Or, maybe some people trust the foreign media more than the local ones.

"We are giving US\$1 billion, but this is the initial phase and we still have to discuss it with (Indonesian) Finance Minister Mar'ie Muhammad," Anwar told AFP.

It was only a day later that the local journalists got to know a little bit more of the important news when Anwar told them that the offer of the standby facility would not have any serious impact on the national Budget.

Anwar had said: "Of course we have the money," and went on to point to the fact that the Government had a surplus Budget.

He said the offer had been discussed with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Anwar's explanation aside, we have to recognise that US\$1 billion is not a small sum of money especially now when the ringgit has depreciated so much against the US currency.

US\$1 billion is today worth in excess of RM3.3 billion compared with RM2.5 billion before the attack on the Asian currency and stock markets.

And this is not the first standby credit Malaysia is offering a financially-troubled neighbour. We made available the same amount to Thailand.

It is not for any one person to say whether the country can afford to offer this huge assistance or whether we should help a neighbour in trouble.

What is important to note is that we still have sizeable foreign reserves which, according to the Finance Minister in his Oct 17 Budget speech, stand at RM61.9 billion.

At the same time, we must also realise that we need every single sen of the reserves to back our currency and to tide us over this difficult period, which may go on for some time.

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THE fact remains that our reserves will continue to be under threat if our neighbours keep falling deeper into economic and financial difficulties.

It should be amply clear to us by now that our misfortune started with the attack on the Thai baht which then spread to other regional currency and stock markets.

So, helping them to get back on their feet is not only neighbourly but essential if the region is to extricate itself from the current economic

quagmire.

We are not ones to beggar our neighbours. Helping them to rebuild their economies is in line with our policy.

We may not be in the best of shape, but compared to Thailand and Indonesia, we are all right.

Thailand is, by any account, in dire straits. It no longer has a choice but to swallow the bitter pills being administered by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

The situation in Thailand is made worse by a weak Government, democratic though it may be. Indonesia, on the other hand, is better off politically.

But both countries, being at a much lower level of development than we, and having a shorter history of development management, are considerably weaker.

Let us hope that this bitter experience, and the fact that we are rallying to help each other, will make us better neighbours in the future - less condescending, less patronising, less ready to play the role of big brother and less susceptible to manipulation by others from outside the region.

Instead of focusing on bangsa serumpun (common racial stock) let us base our future on closer political and economic collaboration.

It is not inappropriate to ask the question: where are the big brothers who sold us the idea of market liberalisation and the timetables for achieving this at the Bogor summit of the Asia Pacific Economic Co-operation when we were being bombarded by speculators and manipulators from their countries?

Hopefully, the region has learned a lesson from the events of the last few months and will approach international conferences and trade negotiations with a more unified stand.

It is interesting to see how nations of Southeast Asia, particularly those who are members of Asean, act and behave at the forthcoming Apec summit in Vancouver, Canada.

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THE warning by the Deputy Prime Minister to the parties responsible for the recent severe water disruptions in Selangor and the Federal Territory not to take Government directives lightly seems too lenient given the gravity of the situation.

This is especially so when Anwar himself harbours the suspicion that some quarters are of the opinion that they can flout regulations with impunity.

He noted that despite directives and warnings from the authorities not to pollute waterways, some industries continued to flout the laws governing their operations.

The stop-work order issued against the quarry responsible for polluting the Langat river with diesel, forcing the closure of two water treatment plants on its lower reaches, does not amount to more than just a slap on the wrist compared to the financial losses and hardship it caused.

For this reason, Wednesday's Cabinet decision not to lift the stop-work order against Kenneison Brothers Sdn Bhd, the quarry owner, until the relevant agencies had come up with measures to prevent a recurrence of the spillage is greatly appreciated.

In fact, it is not inappropriate to keep the order in force until the company has been tried in court and a verdict given. If it is found guilty, the court must impose the severest possible sentence.

The Department of Environment issued the stop-work order against the company on Oct 23 after it was established that its quarry was responsible for spilling 6,000 litres of diesel into the river on Oct 18.

In the long run, a law is needed to make it mandatory for companies

found guilty of polluting the environment to pay for the cleaning up and rehabilitation of the affected areas.

Maybe the Deputy Prime Minister may want the Anti-Corruption Agency to investigate if there was collusion between the quarry owner and the agencies responsible for approving and supervising the project.

Allowing an industrial operation to be established upstream of the water treatment plants was a bad decision. This is especially so when the water treatment facilities had been in operation long before the application to set up the quarry was made.

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THE revelation by the Housing and Local Government Minister Datuk Dr Ting Chew Peh that some State Governments had shown no enthusiasm for the tree-planting campaign launched by Dr Mahathir in March does not come as a big surprise.

Neither is his statement that some State Governments had even converted land allocated for recreational purposes to commercial applications.

Even as he was speaking, we read reports that plans were afoot to alienate Seremban's Lake Garden for commercial development. Such is the destructive effect of greed and short-sightedness.

Ting said directives to maintain green areas and gazette them for recreational purposes had been sent to State Governments a long time ago but some had chosen to ignore them.

Well, Ting is not the first Federal leader to be disappointed. When the Bukit Kayu Hitam township and Universiti Utara in Kedah were being developed, Dr Mahathir specifically instructed that the trees and forests which did not stand in the way of the buildings and roads should be left alone.

Not only were the trees cut down, the surrounding forests were hastily logged as well. The people who ignored Dr Mahathir's advice may no longer be in power but the scars to the once verdant hills and forests remain.

Personally, I do not think Ting's plan to write to the defiant State Governments to remind them of the tree-planting campaign will amount to much either. It will be no better than the much touted and publicised clean-the-drains campaign.

In fact, much of the paperwork and the newspaper publicity on the campaign literally went down the drain - scornfully discarded by the local government bureaucrats.

After all is said, Ting must also accept part of the blame for the failure of that campaign. After pledging to make public the local councils which failed to clean the drains, no such information was forthcoming.

The campaign would have achieved even less or ended in a complete flop had it not been for the persistence of some newspapers and television stations in highlighting the dirty drains on their own initiatives.

I find Ting's statement that what State Governments are sometimes doing is legally correct but morally wrong highly intriguing unless the Minister is suggesting that some laws are morally wrong.

My question is: if a law is morally wrong, how can it be legal?

If Ting still needs the media to help in these campaigns, I suggest that he takes the Press with him each time he calls on a Menteri Besar or Chief Minister to discuss the matter.

He can then call a joint Press conference with the Menteri Besar or Chief Minister during which the media can ask the latter why he is such a recalcitrant.

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