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Protect environment from developers

Harun Hashim

IT is said that everytime Datuk Sari Dr Mahathir Mohamad sneezes, lesser politicians and bureaucrats are galvanised into action, all echoing with similar refrain what should have been obvious if only they had done something about it much earlier.

So said a politician recently, perhaps with tongue in cheek.

I am reminded of the old days of a gramophone and record company with the brand name of His Master's Voice. The company's logo depicted a horn and a dog.

The dog will be in a sitting position with its ears practically glued to the exit end of the horn, a picture of rapt attention, obedience and loyalty.

Time and again, for more than 15 years, the Prime Minister has been cast in the role of an oracle for something to be done about anything only after he had spoken.

It now seems a long time ago when we were invaded by wave after wave of Vietnamese refugees.

The Government appealed to the world community for assistance because we could not afford to accommodate and feed the thousands who came to our shores and islands.

Our pleas fell on deaf ears for a long time until Dr Mahathir spoke out in obvious desperation.

The western Press reported that the Malaysian Government had ordered the army to "shoot" any more refugees.

Tan Sri Ghazali Shafie, who was the Foreign Minister at the time, clarified the statement.

He said that what Dr Mahathir actually said was "to shoo" the refugees away.

The misreported statement, however, drew worldwide attention and soon thereafter our Vietnamese refugee problem received the proper attention it deserved, including from the United Nations.

The latest sneeze came about when the Prime Minister was flying by helicopter from Terengganu to return to Kuala Lumpur.

From the air he was horrified at the sight of what looked like a desert in the middle of a tropical jungle.

Bulldozers had viciously levelled hills and stripped a rain forest bare, landfilling a river in the process.

The local authority responsible for the administration of the area said that the project was designed to have been developed in five phases. It had issued five compliance notices to the developer, all of which had obviously been ignored.

The developer had taken the easy and cheap way out by cutting down the trees and levelling the entire area in one go.

It is easy to issue notices, however strongly worded and threatening, but without follow-up and law enforcement, the effect of such notices is no more than an irritant to developers.

But this particular episode is not unique. Development projects are progressing simultaneously all over the place.

The truth of the matter is that our regulatory agencies do not have the man-power resources to keep an eye on all the projects all at once.

In addition, there is too much trust that everybody will comply with the regulations and approval guidelines.

It is assumed that the professionals will observe the ethics of their respective professions.

Regrettably these assumptions are now misplaced because there is not enough of them to be on the ground.

In the 1960s when I was building my house, I had weekly site meetings with the architect, the structural engineer and the contractor for the six months that it took to build the house.

All materials to be used were subject to inspection and approval of the architect. The main contract price was only RM38,000!

Today it is difficult to find an architect who will be interested to design, let alone supervise a house under construction if the estimated cost is less than RM2 million!

At issue here is the environment. Our forests and rivers must be preserved and protected, otherwise we and the future generations will be in serious trouble.

Development is inevitable and indeed a necessity but it should not be at the expense of the environment which once lost may never be recovered.

Perhaps the time has come to empower the Ministry of Science, Technology and Environment with extraordinary supervisory and executive powers like requiring its approval before a forest is degazetted by the State Authority or even granting timber logging licences.

Too often too late much damage has been done. We cannot afford any more nasi sudah menjadi bubur.

And certainly awaiting the Prime Minister's next sneeze is not something to be proud of.

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