

07/05/1997

Saving the nation's hills, trees

FUTURE generations can sigh with relief, now that there appears to be a hope of growing amid hills that will survive the feverish pace of Malaysia's development. Hope has come in the form of a Cabinet decision to review projects harmful to the existence of hills throughout the country. The new directive requires developers of projects that involve major cutting and tree felling to review their blueprints and minimise non-environmentally friendly acts. Future projects in hilly areas must be developed following the natural contour lines of the sites. In addition, the local authorities have been asked to review development projects that have been approved to include these additional measures. Local authority officers who approve projects which involve major hill cutting and tree felling will face disciplinary action. They could be demoted or even transferred if found guilty.

For the hills to have any chance at all, this directive must be carried out to the letter. And let's hope it is. For too long, our developers and those responsible for approving hill development projects in this country seem to have been just a little short of hearing with regard to pleas by the government and various bodies to act for the preservation of the environment. With the Cabinet planning to act tough on those who hurt the hills in the name of progress and those who collaborate to send the hills down the road to extinction, let's hope some results will come our way soon.

However, if anyone out there is not too hopeful, let's not be too hasty in questioning his. This, after all, is not the first time the authorities have been asked to act against those who are outraging Mother Nature's modesty. Not too long ago, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad lamented the sad state of the Kuala Lumpur landscape, how there had been more hills in and around the city during the good, old days. Dr Mahathir also said that he had raised the issue with the Cabinet and stressed the need for all to do more to preserve the country's beauty even as they raced to build their condominiums, office towers, and golf courses. Down the line, however, the directive somehow dissipated into the twilight.

The authorities who are in fact the custodians of the hills, therefore, must be fully prepared to deal with what the country is being faced with. While there are many developers who have tried their best to protect the environment, there are just as many who do not care about all that is being said about greenhouse effect, global warming, and Agenda 21, as long as their bottomlines are covered. From experience, Malaysia's developers will busy themselves trying to be seen as being environmentally friendly only when someone in power expresses displeasure or when the Government launches a campaign to plant more trees or be more green. Once the displeasure has been reported and the euphoria dies down, the unscrupulous developers will go on with their business of shaving hills of their trees, cutting them to facilitate construction, or even levelling them to accommodate more buildings.

To prevent this from happening, the authorities need to build up a momentum and be less kind to offenders. Housing and Local Governments Minister Datuk Dr Ting Chew Peh, in announcing the Cabinet decision to review hill projects, said the aim of the exercise is "not to punish people". What the Government wants, is for everybody - namely the authorities and the developers - to be committed to protecting the

environment. Perhaps that is why nothing was said about the possible action against errant developers. The Minister may be of the opinion that constructive engagement could work. For the future's sake, let us hope he is right. Nevertheless, many will remain skeptical that all developers would now willingly begin to respect the hills when they did not have to in the past. Stringent regulations and strict enforcement are needed to make the new Cabinet ruling work. Unscrupulous developers must be deterred at all cost. Perhaps state governments, which have jurisdiction over this, should take the initiative and respond positively to the Cabinet ruling.

(END)