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Turning life-giving rivers into killing machines

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PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said in Sabah last Saturday, after visiting the scene of recent killer floods and meeting some of the victims, that a new regulation has to be drawn up to ban the establishment of settlements on river banks.

Let us hope that Dr Mahathir's plea will not fall on the deaf ears of state governments, which are responsible for land and settlement matters.

If we think about it, we do not have to wait for a law to be passed before we realise that the relationship between human beings and the rivers has changed. Building settlements close to rivers is no longer a wise decision.

It was different decades ago. People then built houses close to the river in order to enjoy a better quality of life. The river provided them water for household use and for farming, facilitated transportation and supplemented their income. The unpolluted rivers were rich in aquatic life.

With the hills, mountains, jungles, streams and rivers very much in their natural state, floods were moderate and predictable. Houses were built on stilts and purpose-designed to withstand the vagaries of nature.

My old family house in Tanah Merah in the district of Pendang, Kedah, was a stone's throw from the Sungai Pendang, one of the larger tributaries of the Kedah River.

It was built high on stilts with all the necessary provisions to enable us to live out weeks of heavy rain and floods. The open area, called the pelantar, was large enough for washing and drying clothes. Almost every household had a sampan for movement during floods.

The villagers made no fuss when a cobra or civet cat sought refuge in their houses. They were either killed or driven away. They summoned neither the police nor the fire brigade.

Even Dr Mahathir's Maha Clinic in Alor Star was located very close to the Kedah River. Some of his patients came for treatment in motorboats and sampans.

But in the last two or three decades, the population of rural riverine villages has dwindled as more people move to build larger and better houses close to the roads, which have taken over the role of the rivers as life's new arteries.

This, however, is not the case in towns and cities. Population pressure, the rising cost of land and, more recently, the influx of foreign immigrants have resulted in the proliferation of illegal riverine settlements.

Many of them are built on the river banks, right to the water's edge. The deadly nature of Sabah floods was largely because most of the affected houses were built on the river banks and mud flats.

For disregarding nature, we have turned the life-giving rivers into killing machines. And the fact that these riverside settlements are illegal does not mitigate the culpability of state and local authorities. They are in the habit of allowing such settlements to grow too big before taking action, by which time the human and financial costs of removing them have become prohibitive.

Then, there is an unusual suggestion by a Press commentator that politicians who want to buy expensive properties abroad should use a proxy or kuda belang (striped horse) as he called it.

I wonder if such a suggestion should have been made at all for it could be read to mean that a leader could do something wrong or questionable provided he keeps his name out of it.

Whether intentional or otherwise, such a suggestion is flawed and dangerous. The fact that such a method is widely employed does not mean it should be openly encouraged and accepted.

Surely a person can delay the purchase of a piece of property, especially in a moderately active market like Australia, by a couple of days or even weeks while attending to more urgent matters at home or elsewhere rather than rushing to do it in a manner that raises many unsettling questions.

I do not blame well-to-do Malaysians if they want to buy houses or apartments on Australia's Gold Coast. Having been there for a conference organised by the Pacific Area Newspaper Publishers' Association some years ago, I must say that the Gold Coast is one of the best holiday resorts in Australia.

Many foreigners, especially Japanese, have their holiday or retirement homes there. There are many tourist attractions like the underwater world, the movie world, golf courses and casinos. It is a good hideaway for tired businessmen and politicians.

All said and done, million-dollar deals are seldom conducted in cash, and are often carried out through lawyers, accounting firms or real estate agents.

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