

09/11/1997

Urgent task to clean up

IF a rating were to be given to Malaysians' record of keeping the environment clean, the score would likely not do us proud. Apart from the economic problems besetting us, 1997 should be voted the most eventful year as far as the environment is concerned. Thankfully, the haze has almost disappeared from the Malaysian skies and the authorities are out to ensure it will not recur. But as for cleanliness on the ground level, clearly much more remains to be done.

Lest the people have forgotten the significant events relating to the nation's campaign against littering, we would like to refresh their memory. Sadly, it appears to be all sound and fury signifying nothing. In a nutshell, there has been no lack of directives and proposals to deal with the littering problem as well as moral suasion and warnings against both perpetrators and enforcement authorities. Follow-up actions to shape up and step up enforcement were most apparent after strong statements by the nation's top leaders. Last year's August 11 announcement by the Housing and Local Government Ministry of increased fines and compulsory community work against litterbugs was seen as prompted by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's remark a few days earlier. He called on Malaysians to immediately stop littering if the nation is to stay a model for others.

After the May 10 Umno supreme council's firm statement of measures that need to be taken in maintaining the nation's cleanliness, we saw in August a gotong royong planned before National Day to "spring clean the nation" and instil awareness of the importance of cleanliness. An elaborate plan was in place to improve cleanliness in local authorities. There were also encouraging remarks by Alam Flora, the company undertaking integrated solid waste management, that its ultimate goal is to make Malaysia the cleanest place on Earth.

Earlier in the month, Malaysians were rebuked by Dr Mahathir for lack of consciousness about cleanliness. Iried by a filthy Bukit Bintang, the Federal capital's main shopping centre, he wanted stern action against litterbugs. On the very next day, the Ministry concerned promptly said that it was expediting a draft proposal on the community service for litterbugs under the Solid Waste Management Bill, expected to be implemented next year. There was also a flurry of activity. Local authorities were active and litterbugs fined on the spot. In Kuala Lumpur, fines soared almost 10-fold to RM500. For a while the nation seemed galvanised and committed to the cause of cleanliness.

Alas, two months down the road, it is only too clear that the enthusiasm has waned. We are almost back to square one judging by the myriad photographic evidence in the print and electronic media besides what we can see for ourselves in going round our cities and towns. The filth and stench from piled-up rubbish in backlanes and dumpsites as well as indiscriminate littering are widely prevalent, especially in Kuala Lumpur.

What else can we do? Plenty, says a concerned citizen. Despite the statement by the Ministry that "we have come to a point where we tried everything ... but the situation remains the same", many beg to differ for they feel that the Ministry and the local authorities could do with a lot more proactive and sustained actions. A flash-in-the-pan response will not do. Stiffer penalties are effective only if there is stringent enforcement. The Ministry has an important supervisory role over local

authorities to ensure that they do a proper job. The education process is just as vital. If we have given up on reforming the older generation, there is hope yet in the young. Throughout-the-year campaigns in schools will prove to be rewarding. For the population at large, the promotion of a "Clean Malaysia" has to be a widely publicised and on-going exercise until we attain the goal. The Ministry has an urgent task at hand as we have less than a year to go before the country plays host to the Commonwealth Games.

(END)