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Collective action against dadah

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HISTORY was repeated at the recent United Nations summit meeting against drug abuse.

From June 8-10, the General Assembly held a special sitting in New York, and came up with a global action plan uncannily like the one set out in a 10-year-old UN Convention.

The 1988 Convention against Illicit Trafficking in Narcotic and Psychotropic Substances resulted from a UN meeting in Vienna, chaired by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

It specified the following: To eliminate the cultivation of illicit crops, to reduce demand, and to tighten control on the international movement of illicit drugs and drug-money.

It also suggested strategies for participation at regional, national and community levels.

Yet today, drug abuse is at monumental proportions, with 218 million people affected worldwide. Money-laundering is said to camouflage as much as US\$400 billion (RM1.6 trillion) a year of drug-generated funds.

In Malaysia, the situation is no different. In 1996, there were nearly 14,000 new addicts. Within a year, that figure jumped to over 17,000 - in other words, a new addict every half-hour.

Experts who have worked in the drug-prevention line for nearly two decades are cynical.

"Of course the ideas are good," says one. "And meetings help remind us that these problems exist. But what about the implementation?"

Because borders do not limit or confine the drug trade, it is crucial for countries to adopt combat policies collectively.

But this is no mean feat.

As a producer country, Thailand has been globally urged to adopt alternative crop-growing schemes. Some crops, like coffee and avocado, have worked well securing big, international contracts.

Others, like cabbage-growing, have largely failed.

Indeed, drugs are a tough act to follow in terms of commercial profitability.

For one, there is no ceiling on demand. And unlike cabbage, drugs are non-perishable and can wait any number of years for a depressed economy to revive. "It became so that naughty children were threatened with the prospect of cabbage for dinner," says a Malaysian official.

"Marketing is essential. Someone has got to be willing to undertake the responsibility to link producers with a lively market. Otherwise, alternative crop programmes will surely fail."

But Malaysia's largest problem, which is the demand for drugs, is also due to inadequate prevention programmes.

Because heroin is a group activity, and because a drug habit eventually has to be supported by pushing, demand creates more demand.

During the summit, Deputy Home Minister Datuk Tajol Rosli Ghazali spoke of efforts to create a drug-free generation by the year 2023. At present, nearly half of the addicts in Malaysia are between the ages of 20 and 29.

"We have to start changing attitudes before they are formed. This means starting young," says Tay Bian How, assistant director of the Prevention, Research and Planning Division of the National Narcotics Agency (NNA) here.

In all fairness, there seems to be a new, hands-on approach to the

efforts made by the Government.

Working closely with the Education Ministry, Tay is in fact heading a prevention programme called Students' Resilience and Interpersonal Skills Development Education (STRIDE) to be implemented in 50 schools nationwide.

Loosely based on an American programme, STRIDE emphasises the building of self-esteem and communication skills, in particular, the ability to say no effectively.

"How do you turn someone down, especially if he or she is a good friend?" asks Tay.

Tay also heads a project that brings substance-abuse awareness into the workplace, a crucial link, since NNA statistics show that only 12 per cent of addicts are unemployed.

Funded by the International Labour Organisation, the programme includes a series of abuse-prevention seminars in companies in Penang, Johor, the Klang Valley, Pahang and Kelantan.

"If there is a problem in the community, there will be one in the workplace," says Tay.

And experts have long stressed the importance of community participation.

"The idea is not to establish a monopoly in drug-prevention work," says Datuk Mohd Bakri Omar, NNA director-general and one of the delegates to New York.

Earlier this year, the agency held a day-long session at Kampung Kerinchi in Kuala Lumpur.

Funded by the residents, it was aimed at parents whose children are addicts, or who live under a close threat of addiction.

"We don't want parents to alienate children, because there is no way addicts can kick the habit themselves," he says.

Parents are also urged to help their kids seek treatment. To encourage people to voluntarily come forth, the agency also runs a Pusat Khidmat, where addicts are put on a detoxification programme and given counselling, but are not incarcerated.

Despite the concerted efforts, some spots within the drug-prevention fabric remain weak.

The International Centre for Drug Abuse Prevention in Schools (ICDAPS) is an international NGO with its regional headquarters in the Philippines.

One successful project there was the establishment of official drug-education committees comprising members of the police, educators, parents and the media.

On work carried out locally, chairman R. Gunasingam says: "I would be happy to bring the Malaysian experience to other countries, and vice-versa."

However, he claims, government has been slow to respond, and help is more likely to go to other, more-favoured prevention bodies.

Other shortcomings include (according to another Government officer) a lack of motivation among officials themselves, a desperate shortage of specially-trained counsellors, and the susceptibility of some officers to bribery.

Another must surely be the shortsightedness of critics who object to an NNA proposal to start drug education from as early as kindergarten. This, they say, is as good as introducing the habit to children.

"But my point is that they may try it anyway. If that's the case, they should be equipped with accurate knowledge," says Abdul Rashid Adam, who is director of the Prevention, Planning and Research Division in the NNA.

And maybe, just maybe, history can start to be made.