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Cleaning up Penang's image

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PENANG, once ticked off by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad for being "a garbage dump", has not shown any change for the better after the initial flurry brought about by the criticism.

"In fact, the situation has become worse," says State Youth Council secretary Haniffa Abdul Hamid. "There are still many areas where the rubbish is not collected for days."

He said while the amount of rubbish discarded daily has increased tremendously with the increase in population, the municipal council has drastically reduced the number of labourers involved in garbage collection and disposal.

"In most areas, garbage is only collected every other day and a labourer is rotated between two areas. Of course, the rubbish will pile up on 'no collection' days," he said.

With the impending La Nina weather phenomenon just around the corner, he said, the authorities have been exhorting the people not to discard rubbish in rivers, streams and drains.

Rubbish is being dumped into drains at a rate faster than council workers can clear it. Among the things recovered were typewriters, ceiling fans, tables, radios, television sets, chairs and even a computer.

"But the authorities must also share the blame. There are still many areas without the large roadside bins. Such a situation can only result in indiscriminate dumping of rubbish," said Haniffa.

Even the sea has not been spared. In July, fishermen hauled in 19 tonnes of garbage from the sea within three weeks during a clean-up operation.

The garbage found off the 30m stretch of tourist belt from Pesiaran Gurney to Teluk Bahang included a cupboard, construction material, plastic containers and bags, plywood, shoes, tin cans, bottles and cloth.

P. Balan, adviser to the Penang Inshore Fishermen Welfare Association (PIFWA) said the fishermen involved in the operation collected a daily average of 900kg of garbage floating on the surface within a radius of 500m from the shore.

Jamaluddin Hashim, the clean-up project manager, said the bulk of the garbage was found between Pesiaran Gurney and Tanjung Tokong.

"We believe that most of the garbage was brought down from Sungai Jelutong, Sungai Perai and George Town's drains," he said.

The municipal council has launched a special operation using heavy machinery to clear waterways in preparation for La Nina.

Urban Services Department director Zolkifly Che Din said power jets were used to sluice the drains of clogged matter while Automatic Gully Emptyier (AGE) units would suck out sludge from the drains.

State Tourism, Culture, Arts and Women Development Committee chairman Datuk Kee Phaik Cheen exhorted the people not to dump their garbage in rivers, drains or the sea.

"What you throw in the river will return to your doorstep during floods," she warned.

Trader Fadzil Kadirshah of Air Itam said residents in Air Itam (especially those near the market) and Kampung Melayu are still disposing their garbage in the river.

"There is no change in their attitude and they are still carrying on with their bad, dirty habits," he said.

Business executive Chuah Beng Poh of Bagan Jermal said although there is

a slight improvement in certain areas, more effective campaigns should be carried out to overcome negative attitudes.

"I have seen people in BMWs throwing out fruit skins and other rubbish as they drive along. Surely it is not too difficult for them to have a plastic bag in the car in which all their rubbish can be deposited - and later disposed of at home or at rubbish dumps?" he said.

Businessman Barry Khoo of Lebuhraya Macallum said highrise flat dwellers there were still throwing things down without caring about injuring passers-by or damaging property.

"In recent incidents of objects being thrown from above, a boy was injured by a chair and a woman suffered head injuries from a broomstick," he said.

"In general, the situation still leaves a lot to be desired. Although adequate bins are provided, some are still discarding rubbish everywhere including drains."

Executive Richard Lee of Bandar Baru Air Itam said it was high time the authorities take action in sprucing up the Rifle Range and Kampung Melayu flats.

"These are among the older flats in Penang and the conditions are quite deplorable with rubbish being discarded everywhere. Rubbish as well as other objects are still being thrown down from above," he said.

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