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## Contractors on the carpet

IT'S about time. This can be the only reaction to news that action will be taken against those responsible for bursting water mains, after one such incident unexpectedly left a million people in the Klang Valley high and dry last weekend. With pipes bursting all at once, and at a time when water supply is severely affected in several States, every little bit done to maintain the system would help keep angry protests at bay.

Curiously enough, Works Minister Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu appears to have gone off tangent in explaining how two recent incidents occurred. With public emotions still highly-charged, no one is in the mood to share his obvious pride in "my men" having tackled the repairs in "record time". Just days ago, he and his officials were hard put to say exactly when water supply would be restored to the affected parts of the Klang Valley.

It is a well-known phenomenon that sheer relief often creates an exaggerated sense of bravado after a major catastrophe has been averted. However, figures in authority must not only learn to read consumer sentiment more accurately, but be able to direct official energy to fixing what is broken. In this case, the issue has moved on to one of prevention rather than cure.

For far too long now, contractors have been able to get away with bursting water mains or damaging electricity and telecommunications cables. If the departments concerned have been on their toes in penalising them, the public has yet to hear an accounting of "action" taken. The worry is that such incidents go unpunished once the hue and cry die down.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has repeatedly called for Malaysians to adopt a culture of maintenance, and with good reason. The man hours spent on repairs, opportunity costs foregone by consumers of utility supplies, revenue loss to suppliers, and damage to property all add up.

It is time to think in economic terms if Malaysia is to leave behind a third-world image of dry taps or blackouts, especially when these too-frequent episodes can usually be traced back to careless contractors. While the relevant agencies tritely lay blame on this quarter, they have never explained why punitive measures have not had a deterrent effect.

Today, questions can legitimately be raised about the ability of agencies to keep track of projects under their own jurisdiction and those undertaken by others like local councils and individuals. This is compounded by varying degrees of competence among contractors or sub-contractors and the quality of supervision over their workers.

Is proven negligence punished with a fine and loss of deposit, or is there also dishonourable mention in a blacklist? Do contractors pay for the cost of repairs, or is this met out of public taxes as in the case of repairs by the Waterworks Department? Answers, please.

Utility suppliers too have to look within, to rectify systemic faults towards a "zero disruption" target. At very least, this should involve upgrading the network of ageing pipes and cables, mapping the tangle of equipment in the distribution system, and keeping a close eye on development around sensitive sites located close to utility equipment.

A long-suffering public that has had to "bear with" this or that breakdown would perhaps be more forgiving, if it is convinced that these provide useful lessons - not excuses - to the authorities concerned.

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