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The cost of waste management

EVERYONE generates waste. Individuals, households and enterprises. The diurnal and nocturnal waste that we exude goes into the sewerage system, in places where one is in place. Until two years ago, we did not have to pay for this disposal. Now we incur a cost. We have to pay companies like Indah Water Konsortium which manage the sewerage system. Household waste is disposed of by local councils and municipalities. We may not incur direct costs but we pay indirectly through assessment rates.

Enterprises also generate waste. Time was when mills, factories and manufacturing plants released their solid and liquid effluents into drains and streams. Some of these effluents were harmless. Others posed a hazard to both man and his environment. Increasing awareness led to various laws that curbed wanton disposal. The concept of waste management gained currency and acceptance. Now it is a requirement as manifest in the official opening of the country's first integrated waste management centre in Bukit Nanas, near Port Dickson, by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad on Saturday. It is a state-of-the-art facility built at a cost of RM318 million and designed to process waste like lubricating oils, solvents, acid, alkali, cyanide, chromates and metal hydroxide sludges. Many of these are toxic, threats to life and the environment if not effectively treated and disposed of.

But it appears that not all generators of the potentially harmful waste are fully cognizant of the need to manage properly the disposal of the toxic residues of their plants. This is patent from the fact that only 757 mills out of the 3,000 plants and factories that generate potentially dangerous waste have registered with Kualiti Alam Sdn Bhd, the company that has built the waste management facility. These companies realise that effective disposal involves a cost, money that they have no desire to spend. They are content to store the waste in drums and bury them in any place they can find or allowed to by the local authorities. This option, to be sure, is a cheap solution. It is one that would eventually be expensive in the toll it would exact from the environment.

The wiser way for these factories and plants, as Dr Mahathir said on Saturday, would be to factor in the cost of waste management in their operational budget. He rightly said that the nation's quest for developed status through advances in the industrial sector should be complemented by a management culture that incorporates the cost of effective and efficient disposal of waste. They should include waste management cost for two reasons. One, waste storage within the premises of factories is a dangerous practice. Two, if all the 3,000 factories and plants opt to use the Bukit Nanas facility, the cost of waste management will decrease dramatically. The waste management plant has the capacity to treat all waste generated by these factories.

The recalcitrant companies would be wise to use the facility without further ado. For the Ministry of Science, Technology and Environment is waiting in the wings to come down hard on those companies which have not yet registered with Kualiti Alam. Minister Datuk Law Hieng Ding said on Sunday that these firms would be required to maintain a logbook of management of scheduled waste. The Ministry will query how the waste has been treated and where it has been disposed of. It would be cheaper if they use the Bukit Nanas facility.

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