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Year-ender (Environment)

## WATER SHORTAGE UNDERSCORES ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERN OF THE YEAR

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KUALA LUMPUR: Water rationing that affected the lives of some 3.2 million people in the Klang Valley because of drying dams, was the environmental highlight of the year that also saw the country hosting the 16th Commonwealth Games.

The dry taps, not to mention the wrath of the people, were however a wake-up call to the state governments to cooperate in providing basic amenities to the public, like water.

As a result of the water crisis, one obvious outcome was the cooperation forged between the state governments of Selangor and Pahang, the latter being prepared to supply its excess capacity to Selangor.

This cooperation was effected during the maiden meeting of the National Water Resource Council chaired by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad in June.

The water shortage which started in March, is believed to be the worst ever experienced by the country, especially in term of the number of people affected.

The water crisis is said to be caused by the protracted dry spell brought about by the drought-inducing El-Nino phenomenon when the surface temperature of the Pacific Ocean became warmer, causing an unusually dry spell in many regions across the globe.

The El-Nino phenomenon had also been blamed for the numerous fires that razed thousands of hectares of tropical forests in Indonesia, spewing a thick haze to blanket the region from southern Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, parts of Indonesia to southern Philippines from the second half of last year. The haze took months to dissipate well in time for the Commonwealth Games.

During the water rationing from March to August or so, pails and containers of all shapes and colours were a common sight by the roadside, waiting for the water tankers from the Water Supply Department.

The water levels of the major dams and the drilling of wells or underground water were the main staple of news of the day, not forgetting the daily report of the Air Pollution Index to send the young, old and infirm indoors.

Aggravating the water woes was the pollution of the rivers of the Klang Valley as a result of greed by certain quarters, leading to the shut-down of water treatment plants and hence, more water rationing.

Without rain, the water level in rivers was not only low but its capacity to dissolve matters was also less, said the Minister of Science, Technology and Environment, Datuk Law Hieng Ding, who was certainly kept busy for the year.

The Institute of Engineers Malaysia at one stage, pointed out that the water shortage was also caused by a 35 to 40 percent loss of water supply as a result of old and undetected pipe leakage, in addition to wasteful habits of consumers.

The water shortage also led to friction between the Federation of Consumers Associations of Malaysia (FOMCA) which was fighting for the rights of consumers, and the Selangor state government which is responsible for the Selangor Water Supply Department.

FOMCA which received a lot of complaints from the public, threatened to sue the state government for RM1 million over its inability to resolve the water problem and months of rationing that disrupted daily lives and

businesses.

A blessing in disguise arising from the crisis was that it firmed up the arrangement for states to cooperate in supplying water to a neighbour hit by a water crisis. Water supply is under state jurisdiction.

However, just before the Commonwealth Games, taps began to flow again, to the relief of the people, sport organisers and officials.

Unlike the previous year, 1998 did not see the haze as the main disaster although it did occur on a small scale in several places in the Klang Valley, Malacca and Bintulu where the sources are domestic and the causes were fumes from exhaust, factories and open burning.

With the lessons learnt from 1997, the authorities set up about 40 stations in the country to monitor air quality automatically, each costing RM100,000 to RM500,000 to enhance the country's capability to monitor the environment, detect pollution and gather data.

The authorities also came out with a guideline on open burning to overcome the problem of haze, while amending the Environmental Quality Act 1974 to enhance the penalty upon conviction for open burning from RM100,000 to RM500,000 and/or five years jail.

By November, the people were jolted by news of the La Nina phenomenon, the mirror opposite of La Nino, predicted to hit Malaysia with its excessive rainfall and the ensuing flood. Also expected with the phenomenon was strong wind and landslides in hilly areas.

Minister Law said the La Nina phenomenon which is expected to taper off in February next year, had cost the nation some RM100 million in various damages.

For La Nina, preparations were made down to the district level to face any eventuality brought about by the heavy rain of the annual North-East Monsoon period currently experienced by the country. Among them are evacuation centres with food and shelter for those living in low-lying areas or hillside.

The year also witnessed several measures and changes to enable the country to better monitor and control the environment in the years to come, including the building of the first "remote sensing" earth station in Temerloh, which is expected to be ready by July next year and operational by 2000.

The Malaysian Centre for Remote Sensing (Macres) had inked an agreement with Universiti Telekom this month, for the purpose of enabling the centre to receive directly "remote sensing" data from the region.

Malaysia has also begun using the RM100 million radar system, managed by the Marine Department, to detect and control the passage of every vessel through the Straits of Malacca to prevent collision which will spill oil into the busy waterway.

According to Law, the nation's environment on the whole, is under control for the year and did not show any deterioration when compared with last year.

He said the third quarterly report on air, rivers, water and marine quality which was tabled at cabinet, showed that from the 120 river systems under study in the country, 30 were found to be clean, 68 moderately polluted and the others, polluted.

Air quality is now found to be a good level, while marine quality is also under control although there is a slightly higher level of lead content found in the coastal areas and estuaries. -- Bernama

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