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Better for Federal Government to have say in land matters

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AMID all the heartache and pain of the hundreds of residents who have had to abandon their homes and live a life of uncertainties, the saddest part of the Bukit Antarabangsa episode is that it should not have happened.

Science, Technology and Environment Minister Datuk Law Hieng Ding said on Monday that the warning signs had been there from the early 1990s when a detailed study had declared that the area was prone to landslides.

Although approval for housing at Bukit Antarabangsa was given before the study was conducted, surely the authorities could have ensured that adequate safety precautions were taken by the developers.

The neighbouring Highland Towers collapse which claimed 48 lives in 1993, only strengthened the case for closer monitoring of the area to ensure safety and remedial action is taken at the slightest hint of danger.

So, what happened?

There seems to be more questions than answers. But it's obvious something must be terribly wrong with the way we handle crises, especially if they are allowed to happen despite the alarm bells.

More so if they come so soon after similar incidents and after concerns had been expressed over indiscriminate hill-cutting and tree-felling, and development on hillslopes. And after a lot of promises.

Therein lies our problem. After each incident, State Governments and local councils were quick to give assurances that precautionary measures would be taken to ensure similar incidents would not recur.

Haven't we read headlines like "Warnings fell on deaf ears", "Errant developers to be blacklisted", "Committee formed to probe landslide" or "MB promises action".

As soon as the heat is off, what was said or promised is just as quickly forgotten.

Action committees and task force, while they may serve a purpose, are formed with such regularity these days that even reporters are embarrassed to brief their editors about them.

Meetings are held, findings are made and more often reports, sometimes going into volumes and hence completed long after the incident, are left to gather dust with recommendations completely forgotten and lost in time.

As land matters come under the jurisdiction of the States, the Federal Government says it sometimes does not even know whether its recommendations were implemented.

Then when tragedy strikes, the authorities become reactive but offering neither consolation nor apology but frenetic finger-pointing.

Take Highland Towers. After one of the apartment blocks collapsed, it was everybody's baby. Every single aspect about the place and its safety was under scrutiny. Majlis Perbandaran Ampang Jaya even came up with a master plan for drainage.

Local councils were told to check high-rise buildings in their areas within a week to determine if they were fit for occupation.

In the meantime, other incidents cropped up and everyone was in the "review" mood again.

Soon after the incident at the slip road to the Genting Highlands in June 1995 which claimed 20 lives, then Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim said the Government would review all hill development activities.

Then, there were landslides in Batu Pahat. A hillside had been stripped bare for a housing project. Another directive came, by the Ministry of Housing and Local Government, telling local authorities "to ensure developers follow regulations to prevent a recurrence of the landslides in Batu Pahat".

Reactions get bolder with more landslides. Penang had its Paya Terubong, and commissioned Kumpulan Institut Kerja Raya to do a "comprehensive" study in all high-risk and high-density areas on hillslopes.

In the meantime, those staying in high-rise buildings overlooking hillslopes were having sleepless nights each time it rained.

There have also been many other studies. In May 1997, after another incident, the Cabinet directed a review of all ongoing and planned projects involving hill cutting and tree felling.

There were lone voices too, those who foresaw the rush to build and build during good economic times, greatly impacting the environment and as a result were worried about the consequences.

In 1993, then Economic Adviser to the Government, Tun Daim Zainuddin, had before the Highland Towers collapse commented on the indiscriminate "flattening of hills and uprooting of trees". He commended Kuala Lumpur City Hall then for freezing construction of condominiums and hoped others would follow suit.

In March 1997, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad expressed his concern after spotting from a helicopter a barren 138-hectare hill for Taman Ukay Perdana, a housing project not too far away from Bukit Antarabangsa.

The warnings were there. So, what are the excuses now?

Somebody has to accept responsibility for the Bukit Antarabangsa episode, for the gross inefficiency of not being alert enough.

Otherwise, it would be better, as the residents and NGOs are demanding, for the State Government to surrender some of its powers in land matters to the Federal Government to help improve planning and enforcement of hillslope development.

For most, however, the obvious and most frequent reaction to inefficiency is to swing the axe and watch the heads roll. The trouble with us is that we keep our heads and allow others to keep theirs.

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