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Community service should be imposed on litterbugs, vandals

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ALMOST a kilogramme of rubbish is what the average Malaysian adds daily to his or her annual 300kg of garbage a year.

The exact amount was 820 grammes, said Housing and Local Government Minister Datuk Dr Ting Chew Peh last month when announcing that the Cabinet had directed his ministry to draft a Bill to make community service compulsory for litterbugs.

The minister also revealed that 16 million Malaysians under the purview of local authorities put out close to 15,000 tonnes of trash daily.

While most of the garbage collection is done by various local government agencies or contracted to private companies, a sizeable pile is often strewn around leading to unsightly scenes in stark contrast to the country's desire to achieve developed status within less than 65 years of independence.

"The incidence of littering is very bad. I am very disappointed. Almost every day there are reports in the Press," Ting had said.

But littering is just one of the problems that plague society. Most Malaysians would add vandalism of just about every public convenience and facility to the list of things that disgust them.

Vandalised public telephone booths with missing ear and mouth pieces, even whole handsets, blocked coin slots, filthy toilets, dirty bus stops, missing streetlights and a whole range of other damaged public facilities frustrate people.

Telekom Malaysia, smarting from an average monthly loss of RM200,000 due to vandalism on both its rural and urban equipment, recently announced its intention to install more card-operated phones rather than coin-controlled ones in a bid to combat vandalism.

While this may be one way to fight the menace, it would not do justice to those who do not carry phone cards but need to use a public phone in an emergency.

Besides that, it is also unfair for a poor soul who needs to use a public toilet and sighs in relief at the sight of one, only to be disappointed upon discovering there is no water or tissue-paper, or there is water but no hose or container.

Or having all the facilities which are just too dirty for him or her to do the job.

Recently, irresponsible people put up a politically-inclined poster on a road sign that gives directions to the University Hospital in Petaling Jaya.

The hospital has an accident and emergency unit and if the poster had covered the arrow showing directions, a wrong turn by someone in need of immediate attention could have been disastrous.

The area where the poster was put up houses upper middle-class citizens and has in its vicinity one of the country's premier universities.

Surely the culprit should not be let off with just a fine because unlike "harmless" pranksters, this person could have not only inconvenienced a person in need but endangered life.

Another sickening sight is the scene of a river with a boom across it to trap rubbish which eventually is teeming with plastic bags of all shapes, sizes and colours.

The pile of rubbish gets higher after a downpour as drains contribute their share of slime and swollen rivers take rubbish higher up the banks.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad in August 1997 called for stern action against litterbugs after seeing rubbish strewn on Jalan Bukit Bintang in Kuala Lumpur.

Dr Mahathir said the people should be ashamed that while Malaysia was praised for cleanliness, there were those who continued to litter.

And the people who do these despicable acts should be made to pay for their actions. One way is to make them do community service in full glare of the public - enough to shame most from even thinking of repeating their wrongs.

For those who clamour that community service laws would infringe human rights or contradict Article Six of the Federal Constitution which prohibits slavery and forced labour, Kuala Lumpur City Hall advisory member Datuk Lee Lam Thye says:

"The question of human rights should not come into play. Habitual offenders deserve to do community service and the public has been supporting this."

The rights and convenience of society at large should not be violated by stench on the streets, filthy public toilets, vandalised public telephones, dirty rivers and out-of-place posters.

Federal and State Governments, local authorities and providers of public amenities would be doing a great service to all civic-minded citizens by cracking down on culprits who consider public areas and conveniences their private property to do as they please.

Ministries other than Ting's could also look towards instituting community service for offences that come under their purview.

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