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Hillslopes-Safety (News Analysis)

FATE OF HILLSLOPE HOUSING LIES WITH TENANTS THEMSELVES

By: Azman Ujang

KUALA LUMPUR, May 20 (Bernama) -- Amidst the proposals and counter-proposals on how best to deal with the latest round of landslides that once again threaten the lives of residents of hillslope housing areas at Bukit Antarabangsa here, the wisdom of Prof Hamdan Adnan appears to make the most sense -- "Don't Buy Hillslope Property".

At a glance, the latest appeal by the president of the Federation of Malaysian Consumers Association (Fomca) seems to smack of anti-development but on close scrutiny, it may overcome once and for all a recurring problem which at times, assume tragic proportions.

It also means that in the final analysis, it is for the tenants, both owners and renters of property on what Hamdan calls "unstable areas vulnerable to human negligence and natural disasters" to determine for themselves the safety aspects of their property.

They could do so by not accepting the word or assurance of safety by professionals like architects, engineers, builders as well as the local authorities as the gospel truth.

The lessons of the 1993 Highland Towers condominium tragedy that claimed 48 lives -- just near last Saturday's major landslide at Bukit Antarabangsa that forced 1,000 residents to vacate two condominium blocks -- appear to be quite in vain, judging by the number of hillslope property development still taking place.

Well before the Highland Towers tragedy, there had been reports of occasional landslides on the hillslope behind the collapsed block but for unknown reasons, the tenants or the authorities chose to ignore the imminent dangers, something characteristically Malaysian.

It was widely believed that the landslide near the Highland Towers condominium was due to the then construction of Athenaeum On The Peak condominium whose tenants had to flee following Saturday's landslides.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad had this to say when he inspected the scene of the landslide yesterday: "At the last Highland Towers tragedy anniversary, my wife had met relatives of victims and after that she had written a letter to the New Straits Times reminding readers of unmanaged hillslope development.

"When she learnt that I was coming to visit Bukit Antarabangsa, she said that she knew then that something like this could happen again.

"If she could think such, I am sure there are others who would have also thought likewise".

Dr Mahathir described how negligent tenants of such housing areas could be when he said: "But we (Malaysians) have always been very casual. We forget miseries in good times, when the going gets tough we cry, we seek help from the government".

The harrowing trauma of the Highland Towers tragedy, told in vivid details for weeks on end -- even shown on live television -- had not been an effective "advertisement" to scare people from buying such property, or to stay in one.

Of course, in many instances, people become wiser with the benefit of hindsight after lives have been lost. Following the Highland Towers tragedy, for example, many said that the condominium block should not have been built in the first place because the hillslopes "looked so fragile".

Perhaps the biggest folly of housebuyers had been also in being too trusting of what in Malaysia is commonly called CF (Certificate of Fitness)

in the case of a landed property.

Hamdan says the resident of unstable areas such as hillslopes should question how approvals were given by the local authorities, adding that "corruption is also an issue to be considered".

One inherent weakness is the fact that local councils and state governments at present are the only authorised bodies to approve projects.

Hamdan says other ministries such as the Science, Technology and Environment Ministry should also be involved in giving approval for a stronger check and balance mechanism to be in place.

A senior local architect said one of the weakest links in the Malaysian construction industry had been that while professionals like doctors, lawyers, accountants and architects were governed by their own Code of Conduct, there's none for builders of construction projects, despite the serious implications of matters like construction defects.

"It's like the doctors having their Code of Conduct but not the surgeons who do the operation on the operating table," he told Bernama.

And construction defects are one of the most common stories told and heard in Malaysia.

There's hardly been reports of any deterrent action taken by the authorities against those responsible for sub-standard construction, including for the all too frequent fatal mishaps at construction sites, except for the standard temporary "Stop Work" order.

Compare the situation to South Korea. When a shopping complex and a bridge collapsed in Seoul several years ago, the authorities immediately detained the contractors and some even received prison sentence soon after.

The revelation by Science, Technology and Environment Minister Datuk Law Hieng Ding that the Federal authorities were "helpless" in enforcing stringent laws for hillslope development at the state level is also disturbing, to say the least.

This is because as things stand, land matters fall under the jurisdiction of the state governments.

Whether the Federal government will now want to have a say in land matters given the fact that some states, as shown by the landslides at Bukit Antarabangsa, had been quite unconcerned with safety aspects of land development -- until it is too late -- remains to be seen.

At least the residents around Bukit Antarabangsa can thank their lucky stars. They were given a warning of the possible threat to come last Saturday, unlike the fateful Saturday of Dec 11, 1993, when the Highland Towers condominium collapsed like a deck of cards just within seconds.

If tenants of hillslope housing were to heed Hamdan's advice, then such property development would phase itself out naturally.

It would not only prevent loss of lives but the merry-go-round of finger-pointing by the authorities everytime a tragedy strikes.

People who live on such unstable grounds could not, in all fairness, be too demanding of the authorities when in the first place, they too were booking their own destiny by staying there.

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