

02/07/1999

No tangible solution in sight for water problems in Kelantan

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THE water crisis in Kelantan has become the longest-running issue in the State and one that has spawned numerous Press statements and counter-statements over the past few years, but with no definite solution in sight.

The build-up of the issue goes back to the early 1990s and culminated in 1995 when the matter shot into prominence after the State Government was committed to an agreement to award the water concession project to British-based Thames Water under a joint venture privatisation exercise.

The timing of the deal drew much flak in view of the Federal policy about a year earlier banning new contracts with British firms over unsubstantiated reports by British media of alleged corruption on the part of Malaysian political leaders in deals involving British firms.

The Kelantan State Government defiantly carried on with its plan.

Four years on, with brief lapses in between, the issue remains as contentious as ever with speakers at political ceramah or gatherings religiously exploiting the issue, suspiciously, for their own ends rather than solving the problem for the interest of the people.

The slew of Press statements concerning the issue, in particular between the two major camps - Pas and Umno - is flowing faster than the taps in thousands of homes in Kelantan.

Yet, the problem on the ground continues to afflict the end-users - the consumers who are not assured of supply.

They cannot but feel left "high and dry" with constant problems of water supply interruptions, sub-standard water quality, and, to some extent, acute shortages which stretch for days.

Their plight has generally been addressed with half-hearted and at best ad hoc approaches, without much thought for a long-term solution.

Out of this predicament, self-help became the public's means of coping, forking out their own money to invest in digging wells or engaging contractors to source for ground water and installing electric pumps.

The privatisation exercise, carried out with the aim of improving the supply of piped water to subscribers in October 1995, has failed to find the answer to the water woes.

The company awarded the concession for water supply and services, Kelantan Water Sdn Bhd, which was 70 per cent owned by Thames Water and the remaining 30 per cent by Kelantan Darulnaim Foundation, officially broke partnership on April 2, this year, ending a 25-year concession agreement.

On the same day, Menteri Besar Datuk Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat announced a Federal Government's soft loan totalling RM600 million to help solve the problem.

The loan facility which Nik Aziz had reportedly said was approved by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad about a fortnight earlier, has prompted renewed debate among the politicians.

Pas, in its usual holier-than-thou religious fervour, attributes the loan approval by the Prime Minister to the "blessing" for an ulamak-led State administration while Umno leaders, quite rightly, credit it to the Barisan Nasional Government's concern for the interests of the people in Kelantan.

A change-over of management of water supply back to the State Government following the break-up and the RM600 million loan was seen as a recourse

to improved services.

For a period, the State Government which acquired the 70 per cent stake in KWSB from Thames Water for a cash settlement of RM50 million, could not do much and has since left the running of the water management and services to Air Kelantan Sdn Bhd, effective April 29.

As it turns out, localising the company's name has not done much good either as water interruptions continue.

And the officials at Air Kelantan prefer to keep mum rather than entertain requests to clarify the state of affairs on water supply.

State Government officials, right after the announcement of the RM600 million soft loan, have promised that the problem will be solved by June this year but, as it is, the disgruntled consumers are still far from satisfied.

Kelantan Consumers Association president Yusoff Ahmad said although the water supply problem had been talked about feverishly over the years, the problem was still far from over.

He said everybody should stop blaming each other for the problem, but instead identify their own weaknesses and past mistakes to work out a solution for the benefit of the public.

"The issue is just an old song being played with a different tune all these years," he said, adding the problem should have been tackled by the relevant authorities way back in the 1980s.

From his knowledge and as far as the issue was concerned, he said the present infrastructure such as the pipeline network to homes had been laid out between the mid-1970s and early 1980s.

He said especially in Kota Baru, where the old pipeline system is still in use, the problem was most acute as the old network is no longer able to meet the growing population and development needs in the district.

Therefore, he pointed out the previous State Government should have acknowledged its negligence then while the present State leaders should properly address the problem now and find a long-term solution.

Describing the water problem in Kelantan as serious, he said a media furore would not be of help as the consumers want to see more concerted efforts for a better service.

Yusoff said despite the change in water management, the problem of interruptions, low water pressure and sub-standard water quality still persisted, much to the chagrin of the consumers.

"It will definitely take time to improve the overall service but the new management has to take appropriate measures to gradually improve the service."

"But I believe the consumers may have to wait longer before the problem can be fully resolved."

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