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Penang sheds a bit of its dirty image

PENANG, Tues. - The "Pearl of the Orient" which once incurred the ire of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad for being dirty, seems to have made some progress with cleanliness, although residents say there is still plenty of room for improvement.

While most Penang residents claim the level of cleanliness on the island has improved - thanks to regular efforts of the local authorities - there is still much to be done, a New Straits Times survey revealed.

Island Park resident K.B. Neoh said it was apparent that steps had been taken by the municipal authorities to ensure that regular garbage collection and clearing of drains were helping Penang emerge cleaner.

"There has been some slight improvement here since the Prime Minister criticised us many years ago. The drains in my neighbourhood are cleaned regularly and I think we can see this in the fact that flash floods are not so common these days after heavy showers," said the 36-year-old father of two.

Secretary Bernadette de Souza finds Penang beaches "slightly" cleaner these days, although she finds civic pride lacking in Penang people.

"We should realise how beautiful our beaches are and that people come from so far to enjoy them; why should we mar this beauty - especially since this year has been designated Visit Penang Year - by throwing garbage into the waterways which ends up washed up onto our shores.

"People should be more responsible and stop throwing plastic items and bottles into the sea."

NST photographer Kamil Rahim saw exactly what de Souza meant when he was greeted by a sea of garbage swept in by the tide at Jelutong's Jalan Mohd Taib.

Residents in the area claim they have become used to the stench enveloping their homes at high tide and are resigned to the fact that the garbage floating below their homes on stilts are a permanent feature.

The garbage includes empty bottles, styrofoam packages, old shoes and plastic bags filled with more garbage.

Dental officer Dr Elise Monerasinghe who has just returned to Penang from the US after completing her studies, said:

"The level of hygiene at hawker stalls has improved in the past two years; the floors of these spots appear cleaner and the white caps and aprons donned by the hawkers seem to give them a better image."

Dental surgical assistant Halimah Ibrahim also finds that eating establishments on the island have improved in terms of hygiene, although more need to be done.

"Our hawker stalls and eateries used to be so filthy.

"But now, even the nasi kandar outlets are boasting clean kitchens and utensils and I think it may have something to do with the fact that the health authorities are making regular checks on such places," she said.

Her colleague Harris Tan Abdullah meanwhile said the deplorable condition of roads and drains in Lorong Perak needed to be upgraded owing to the massive development in the area.

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