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Pollution: Act before being told

THE country is blessed with a multitude of rivers. They radiate every single State, the source of water for households and for the green fields of padi wherever they are planted. But the problem is most rivers, if all, are polluted, especially downstream and in the estuaries. Nature contributes its share as embankments dump soil and mud wherever swollen rivers bend with heavily laden waters. Riverine settlements add to their colour and content with human, kitchen, household and animal waste. Still most are "alive", engendering flora and fauna. But not so others. They are biologically "dead".

The Department of Environment has long cast a concerned eye over the state of the rivers. Indeed, it has identified 18 to be the most polluted in the country. Among them is Sungai Sepang. Paradoxically this "dead" waterway flows through an area where nearby is the gleaming state-of-art multi-billion ringgit Kuala Lumpur International Airport. Almost everybody, every agency involved in the management of the country's river systems, including the State Government of Selangor, knew the existence of this highly polluted river. But their reaction has so far been one of benign neglect.

But they will be jolted into action now that the Prime Minister has espied on a "blackish" river from the plane that flew him home from an overseas trip and has made his observations known to high officials. If precedence is any indicator, the relevant authorities would be spurred to issue a flurry of edicts and engage in enforcement exercises. They have been quick to respond each time the Prime Minister highlighted incidents of environmental degradation. Once Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad spotted a barren project site as he was taken on a helicopter ride. After he mentioned that observation, action was taken against the developer who was taken to court and fined for breaching a condition in the Environmental Impact Assessment.

The question here is: must the authorities need the prodding of the Prime Minister before acting against polluters and environment degraders? The DOE had long known that the Sungai Sepang was a "dead" river. The Selangor State Government had long known who the polluters are. Why did the authorities not act against the swine breeders whose farm waste contribute most to the despoiling the waters of the river? They did enforce the relocation of those pig farms located near the site of the KLIA. Why did they overlook other farms located further up along the riverbank? Is it due to a lack of political and enforcement will? Or is it the sad consequence of preserving the status quo and not wanting to cause too much disruption to animal breeders? Whatever the reason, such a state of affairs should not be allowed to persist.

In the specific instance of the Sungai Sepang they should relocate the locations where they would contribute little or nothing to environmental degradation. They should be forced to institute measures to ensure the breeding farms remain clean all the time. And while they are instituting these exercises they should also study the impact of riverine settlements. Such habitats not only contribute to river pollution, they also pose hazards, very real hazards, to the households living along river banks. Rivers, especially after heavy rains have a natural tendency to eat up river embankments, sometimes taking away houses in their surging waters. So act before being told or before tragedies occur.

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