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PM's fear confirmed by Tiungsat-1

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PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has fought many battles, winning most and losing some. But one battle he seems not to be winning is against the destruction of the environment.

Very often, his enemies are the very same people who benefit from his high growth and pro-business policy. More often than not, these irresponsible and unscrupulous businessmen are in cahoots with State authorities who have jurisdiction over land and natural resources.

His fear that land-related development in the country's highlands is causing unmitigated destruction of the environment was, two weeks ago, confirmed beyond doubt.

The country's first microsatellite, Tiungsat-1, which was launched from Russia's Baikonur Cosmodrome in Kazakhstan on Sept 26, showed massive loss of forest cover in Cameron Highlands due to development.

Reacting to the alarming information from the satellite, the Cabinet on Wednesday shelved all new development projects pending a study of all sensitive highlands in the country.

The images sent back by Tiungsat-1 and other earth orbiting satellites show that Cameron Highlands has lost as much as two per cent of forest cover between 1991 and this year.

If Tiung's eye-in-the-sky can change things for the better, we should all celebrate its launching and consider the money and time spent worthwhile. The 50-kilogramme satellite is designed to take pictures of the earth's surface to detect pollution, forestry and agricultural activities, gather meteorological data and monitor natural disasters.

Maybe the mechanical gadget high up in the blue yonder will have better luck than earth-bound media photographers and cameramen in convincing the authorities that Cameron Highlands and other highland resorts are in a precarious state.

The destruction of the highlands is neither new nor unknown. And it certainly does not take a satellite to prove the case. The media has for years been highlighting the degradation of our highlands due to logging, unplanned tourism development and illegal farming.

But the abhorrence against their destruction has been short-lived. Condemnation and promises of stern action were made only when landslides buried a few people alive and closed roads.

The errant developers and the State authorities responsible for alienating large tracts of land and approving their development received nothing more than a slap on the wrist.

Alas, what the public would like to know most would not be within the capacity of Tiungsat to achieve. It cannot tell us who approved the alienation and development of the highland forests. Who they were given to. And who the destructive contractors were.

Were they given to nameless and landless Tan, Doraisamy and Halim or to the rich and the powerful? It is more likely to the latter. The former are more likely to be illegal settlers.

The answer to it can only be dug up by earth-bound journalists with the help of officials in State capitals.

Still, we celebrate Tiungsat's maiden revelation. Hopefully, what earth-bound journalists have not been able to achieve by way of convincing the powers that be to act decisively, Tiungsat can. Long live Tiungsat!