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Our capital's sorrows

KUALA Lumpur is a city with two faces. One, the face of a savvy city, brimming with action and pulsating with energy; the other is beset with the sorrows of ill-conceived urbanisation such as squatter and flood problems. A sodden city whenever it pours.

The massive floods that ravaged the capital last week is a clear indication that its development policy, planning and enforcement are awry. Floods, which are fairly recurrent, can no longer be attributed to an act of God. It was no cyclone that hit the Klang Valley last week. Rather the downpour was construed as normal whereby, according to the Meteorological Department, the retention rate was normal with the total of 43.4mm in Petaling Jaya and 10mm in Subang Jaya.

With the frequency of flash floods hitting the city, it is ludicrous for the authorities to propose a meeting to determine the reasons for the floods. Now is the time for action to ensure there will be no similar occurrence of the magnitude experienced last Thursday. By now, the reasons should have been manifestly clear: poor planning, improper drainage, inadequate enforcement and lack of maintenance culture.

We are appalled by the seeming nonchalance of Datuk Bandar Tan Sri Kamaruzzaman Shariff when he said, "There is no way of stopping the floods". Pray tell, what then is the purpose of the RM72 million allocated from City Hall's 2001 Budget for flood mitigation projects and other maintenance work. It must be accountable for each and every sen spent and thus, if the floods are indeed unavoidable, the money should be better channelled to other projects such as housing for the lower-income groups.

As asserted by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, the floods are avoidable. Unfortunately, ad-hocism has defined the collective mentality of the authorities. Fatalism, too, has taken hold of some of the top officers.

But more appropriately, it is intellectual laziness as manifested in the reluctance to challenge the orthodoxy of their work culture which includes a lackadaisical attitude.

We have had too many assurances given by City Hall that it will act fast but the recent episode of flash floods shows the gap between rhetoric and action. Many ideas were floated but with little follow-up.

It is likely that slogans on the capital will eventually be scorned by its citizenry and those who do the sloganeering will be dubbed charlatans. The question is: Who minds City Hall if it is lacking? City Hall must efficiently enforce the very rules that it enacted. They are not abstruse reference points. Not only it must be pro-active in tackling the woes of the capital, it must muster the will to effect rules and follow-up actions.

Clearly, ill-conceived and massive development in the past decade have led to the clogging of our drainage system. The existing drains badly need upgrading to cope with the increasing volume of run-off into the drainage system.

The Urban Stormwater Management Manual dictates the replacement of drains with water absorption areas around houses and grass-filled "swales" or natural canals with underground water-retention tanks along highways. But good as they may be, nothing good will come out of it without stringent enforcement.

There have been many proposals. The point is the know-how must be

converted into do-how and this is precisely what ails the system today.
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