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All must shoulder herculean task

By Brendan Pereira

AH, the new year's here. Time for Malaysians to draw up wish lists for 2005. Here is what I hope will happen over the next 12 months.

Correction. Hope sounds half-hearted and leaves too much to chance. Here is what I pray will happen.

* For less tolerance towards the third-rate maintenance culture in Malaysia. Until Dec 26, the legendary inability or unwillingness by Malaysians to do a good job of keeping the house in order was confined to allowing new buildings to look old within a short span of time, to make public toilets a national embarrassment, to turn the beautiful and pristine beaches into landfills and to treat rivers like sewerage tanks.

Former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi have attempted to cajole and shame Malaysians into caring more for public facilities and the environment. For most past, their attempts to change the behaviour of 25 million people have been lost in the wind.

Why?

Because this lament about a third-rate maintenance culture is abstract, it involves property which we have no ownership over. Also, we have conditioned ourselves to go into lifts stinking of urine and buses with seats missing. It is part of our forgiving nature.

What happened on Dec 26 should make us reassess this tidak apa attitude towards the culture of maintenance. This was the day when earthquake-induced tsunamis slammed into coastal areas in several Asian countries. This was the day when our cavalier attitude towards making sure that the standard operating procedures work well proved costly.

The death toll in Malaysia stands at 66 while the cost of damage to property in Penang, Kedah, Perak and Perlis will probably be more than RM100 million. Yes, this was a natural disaster. Yes, it is almost impossible to predict with any precision when tsunamis will strike.

But could more have been done to warn Malaysians of this earthquake of record-breaking magnitude and possibility of high waves? Absolutely.

Could information have been sent by the Meteorological Services Department in a more timely fashion? Definitely.

Penang police chief Datuk Othman Talib said police were not informed about the possibility of tidal waves hitting the island. This was why people were not warned to stay away from beaches and the sea.

Yet such information was in the hands of the authorities. Why it could not be passed down the line can only be blamed on that deadly combination of the tidak apa attitude and poor maintenance of standard operating procedures.

We may have some of the most detailed information on what to do in disasters but they will come to naught if individuals all along the chain do not act with urgency.

That was just one of the lessons of Dec 26.

* For a more vigorous approach to fighting corruption. There is little doubt that the Anti-Corruption Agency (ACA) was busier last year than in previous years. The statistics bear testimony to this fact.

Still, so much more needs to be done. The ACA can start by going after government officials who appear to be living beyond their means. Anecdotal evidence suggests that some officers in law enforcement agencies own properties or cars that they could not have purchased on their salaries.

For this purpose, the graft-busters should rely on Section 25(1)(a) of the Prevention of Corruption Act 1961. Under this section, anyone failing to declare their assets can be jailed or fined.

Among those who were previously charged under this section was former Selangor Menteri Besar Tan Sri Muhammad Taib and former Sabah Foundation director Datuk Dr Jeffrey Kitingan. Both were acquitted.

And while they are cleaning up the public sector, it would also be useful for ACA officers to deal with corruption in Umno. Surely, one of the most farcical episodes in 2004 was the unwillingness by the ruling party to have its politicians accused of vote-buying investigated for corruption.

Several senior politicians argue that what goes on in the party should stay in the party. This position may be misguided if the individual accused of vote-buying is a minister, deputy minister or parliamentary secretary.

In such a situation, it will be incumbent upon the ACA to find out how the government official obtained the funds to buy votes. Did he abuse his position in the Government?

For the Government to continue to enjoy the respect of Malaysians, it is crucial that the ACA be allowed to go in and clean up Umno.

* For more good people to come forward and check excesses in the system. Malaysians cannot leave the job of cleaning up Malaysia, of untying the knots of bureaucracy, of checking religious and racial extremism, of exposing self-serving corporate and lifting the lid on shenanigans, to Abdullah.

It is a herculean task for one man to change or reform the system. Especially when some among us still want the old ways of doing business to prosper.

Remember, the only thing needed for evil to prosper is for good men to do nothing.

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