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An environmental tragedy: But who weeps?

By Salleh Buang

BY now, many of us would probably have forgotten what our fourth Prime Minister, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, told the Dewan Rakyat on Oct 30, 2003 when presenting the Mid-Term Review of the Eighth Malaysia Plan.

The theme of his speech that day was the attainment of balanced development, or, if you prefer the more popular jargon, "sustainable development".

The former PM said that within just 46 years, Malaysia had grown from being an insignificant Asian country dependent solely on tin and rubber into a fully industrialised nation, a global player strong in both the manufacturing and IT sectors.

Average per capita income had soared to the US\$4,000 (RM15,200) level, while the national literacy level was around 94.1 per cent.

In terms of professional training, we had produced more than 87,000 professionals - of whom more than 12,000 were doctors and more than 10,000 were lawyers.

The poverty rate, which stood at 52.4 per cent on Merdeka Day, had been greatly reduced and in 2002 was a mere 5.1 per cent of the population. Further, more than 90 per cent of the residential buildings in urban centres had been supplied with water and electricity.

In keeping with the slogan, Malaysia Boleh, we have Malaysians who had conquered Mount Everest, walked the North Pole and swam across the English Channel. In terms of the world's trading nations, we were placed eighteenth.

A very credible performance, indeed, for such a young nation. But is the total picture really that rosy?

"Development" must not be measured merely in the physical sense, such as by how many new townships, industrial estates or housing projects that have been built. Neither should it be measured merely in monetary terms - by the number of banks and financial institutions in the country, our per capita income, trade surpluses or amount of national savings - nor by pointing at the increasing number of mega projects that have been completed or are being carried out.

More importantly, "development" must be measured in human terms. An overall assessment of the quality of life of every single human being residing in this country must be done - locals as well as foreigners; the rich and the poor; urban dwellers; farmers; fishermen; estate workers and the village folk.

Put in its simplest terms, quality of life is maintained, and sustained, when man can live in perfect harmony with Mother Nature; when he is willing and able to take care of the environment, which will in turn take care of him. Quality of life exists when man is at peace with nature, and vice-versa.

Seen from this perspective, can we honestly say that we have maintained and sustained our quality of life, and that we have taken care of our environment? Or have we become, by design or default, Mother Nature's worst enemy?

Remember the character Dr Gil Grissom in the popular TV series CSI, who said, "I love mankind. It's people I can't stand"?

To my mind, the most frightening prospect is when man no longer cares about the continuing assault on the environment. Everything is deemed acceptable, everything is endured, no sacrifice is too small - all in the

name, and for the sake of, development.

The tragedy is that we all see what is happening, but not enough of us really care to do anything to stop it. At the international level, you see this in the policy of the United States towards the Kyoto Protocol on global warming.

A couple of weeks ago, a resident of George Town in Penang was quoted as saying, on prime time TV news, that in the good old days, Sungai Pinang was an abundant source of fish for people living by the river. Now, it is a cesspool of domestic waste and industrial effluents.

The same thing can be said of Sungai Juru on mainland Penang, or even about the waterways in Sungai Petani and Alor Star in Kedah.

In the Klang Valley, local residents must surely remember how "Taman Pertanian Bukit Cahaya Seri Alam", formerly called Bukit Cerakah Agriculture Park, looked like in the beginning, when it was first opened to the public.

I visited the place a couple of times in the early 80s, when I lived in Petaling Jaya. Now, some two decades later, what I have learned about it from newspaper reports is simply unbelievable. To think this sad state of affairs could happen in the "most developed State" in the country!

What had happened at the agriculture park, as photographs published with the reports showed, proves beyond any reasonable doubt that there are still plenty of people who have a perverse sense of development. If these people are allowed to "manage" our development programme for the next decade, forget about Local Agenda 21, forget about sustainable development and forget about smart growth! It is all empty talk!

A full-page report in a daily said that this once beautiful area - a virgin jungle that also serves as a "green lung" or "oxygen tank" for Klang Valley - is now facing certain ecological destruction. What was before an 800ha site, protected and managed by the Agriculture Ministry, is now merely a tiny blot of green space against a brown canvas of ground, where earthworks have been gleefully carried out in the name of progress and development.

The shocking thing is that this happened despite a Cabinet decision that the park "shall be safeguarded as Taman Botani Negara", set to become the world's largest agro-forest by 2007.

So, who is to blame? Is it double-talk from the top, or (as has happened before) the voice from the top was completely ignored at ground level?

The report went on to say that much of the land on the northern fringe of the park, a forest area of roughly 1,200ha and which appears on the map as being under the jurisdiction of the Shah Alam City Council, has been cleared, and continues to be.

The cleared land has been carved out and alienated by the State Authority to some 35 housing developers, with each developer getting between eight and 60ha.

On its southern perimeter, land measuring 200ha has been alienated to yet another housing developer. This spot is said to be close to Taman Kaktus.

Many parties are therefore benefiting from the assault on the environment. The fact that this is actually a crime against the environment has been conveniently overlooked.

Since the developers and the relevant authorities are benefiting from the deal, who cares about an increase in the atmospheric temperature (global warming)? Who cared about the flooding at Kampung Budaya in November 2003? Or the flooding of Taman Orkid? Or the dead fish in Tasik Empangan Sungai Baru?

In due course, the newspaper report said, a 50ha site at the agriculture park would be transformed into an elite community for the super rich,

where each bungalow is expected to be offered for sale from RM1.5 million each.

We are witnessing a grave environmental tragedy unfolding. But who's really weeping, not just shedding crocodile tears?

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