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Another denudation? It's as old as the hills

By Syed Nadzri

IT'S hard not to be cynical about the Bukit Cahaya fiasco. In fact, it's hard not to be cynical about any environmental cock-up of that nature because it is turning into a routine - a two- or three-year cycle.

This time, a huge forested area, 20 times bigger than an average 18-hole golf course on the northern fringe of the Bukit Cahaya Agricultural Park has been cleared completely of its trees to make way for a housing project.

The ecological debacle has outraged most people, including the country's top leaders. A probe was ordered. A few developers have been blamed and face prosecution. Existing laws are being reviewed. Promises are made.

So what else is new? Well, to quote singer-songwriter Neil Diamond, "Except for the names and a few other changes, the story's the same one."

Last week, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi took a helicopter ride to see for himself the extent of the degradation at the Bukit Cahaya forest reserve.

Obviously displeased, he said: "There was not a single tree standing ... not even grass can be seen in the cleared area."

Eight years ago, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who was the Prime Minister then, made a similar remark when he saw, also from a helicopter, massive land clearing and hill cutting in Hulu Klang. He was returning from Taman Negara when he spotted the destruction.

Here's a recap of some of the events that took place and the things said previously. They all have a familiar ring:

&#x2022; August 1994: Indiscriminate land clearing discovered in Lojing Highland, Kelantan, and the Federal Government wanted action to be taken against the developers. Then Department of Environment enforcement director Rosnani Ibrahim said it was clear that the Environment Impact Assessment regulations and the Land Conservation Act were not observed before developing the hilly terrain near Cameron Highlands.

&#x2022; August 1994: Dr Mahathir on a visit to Cameron Highlands: "I am worried if we allow wanton destruction, there will be no more hills left for us. I have given directives to State Governments many times before but these seem to have fallen on deaf ears. The directives have not been followed. Some departments are not taking the matter seriously."

&#x2022; February 1996: Stop-work order issued to the developer of Mimaland Golf Resort, near Gombak in Selangor, after the project was found to be environmentally damaging. Following this, the Selangor Government directed district offices and local authorities to review development projects in their areas and take immediate action against developers who flouted environmental laws.

&#x2022; February 1996: Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib, who was then Selangor Menteri Besar: "There are far too many projects in Selangor and it is impossible for the State Government to check every one and every move of the developers. That is why a directive to district offices and local authorities is issued so that speedy action can be taken against developers who fail to comply with environmental regulations."

&#x2022; March 1997: Muhammad on the Hulu Klang land clearing: "The State Government will not tolerate any indiscriminate clearing of land for development."

&#x2022; May 1997: The Cabinet called for a review of all on-going and

planned hillslope development projects involving hill levelling and tree felling to strike a balance between development and environmental conservation.

Government officials who fail to enforce regulations for approving hillslope development, and who failed to ensure the projects comply with the guidelines, would be penalised. The then Housing and Local Government Minister Datuk Dr Ting Chew Peh: "Local authorities are giving excuses such as shortage of manpower for their lack of enforcement. We cannot accept lack of manpower as an excuse and we have directed local authorities to use whatever resources available."

&#x2022; September 1997: Logging and land clearing activities continued unabated despite the Cabinet twice calling on the Kelantan Government to act decisively. An NST team which went to investigate found that logging activities were rampant. Hills stripped of their trees were left bare and exposed to rain, leading to soil erosion. Rivers were clogged with soil, affecting their flow and eroding the banks.

&#x2022; October 2000: Dr Mahathir at a landscaping project in Bukit Jalil: "Hills and trees should be maintained when projects like housing are implemented. The present practice is to level hills and cut trees, followed by landscaping on completion of the projects. This involves double work and waste."

&#x2022; March 2002: The Cabinet approved guidelines on development in Cameron Highlands and this would be included in a comprehensive set of rules for all major highlands nationwide. Among the key points were strict regulation of construction projects on hillslopes, on farming on hillslopes; and the creation of buffer zones of at least 50 metres along rivers.

What can roughly be derived from the above examples is that the practice of unmitigated land clearing in the name of development and the rhetoric that goes with them are as old as the hills. And we will hear and read about them again when the next cycle comes.

To be pro-business and to have an environment-friendly policy is proving to be too delicate a balance for State Governments to handle.

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