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Penang's imbalanced development

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PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's remarks on the imbalanced development of Penang's North Coast hardly surprised those familiar with the situation.

Way back in 1973, the New Straits Times was among the few expressing its reservations when the State Government, then led by (Tun) Dr Lim Chong Eu, announced massive development plans to transform the North Coast into a "tourist play-ground".

The discerning few had noted that the future well-being of the have-nots living there, such as the fishermen, had not been taken into consideration.

The writing on the wall then was - if you cannot cope with the impending changes and modernisation, it's just too bad. Look out for yourself!

What must have been most galling to the Prime Minister was the sight of wooden houses and shanties lying cheek by jowl with condominiums and multi-rise hotels as he accompanied the visiting ruler of Brunei, Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah.

To Dr Mahathir, the many old wooden houses, similar to the ones he had seen way back in the 1950s, showed that there were still many who had been left behind by the great march of progress.

In Penang, the majority of "those who had been left behind" and those who could not afford luxury housing are the Bumiputeras.

One can understand Dr Mahathir's consternation and disappointment on seeing dilapidated wooden houses still standing here.

Thirty years ago in April 1973, the late Tun Abdul Razak, who was then Prime Minister, also visited Tanjung Tokong (the UDA flats had not yet been built there) and advised villagers to adopt the good points of modern living, and to change their attitude towards living in urban style surroundings.

"We must not think about how we lived in the past and continue living that kind of life.

"The modern trend is to live in properly-planned areas where modern facilities are available," Tun Razak said.

The problem of proper and adequate housing for the Bumiputera community in Penang is certainly not new.

In fact, it is more than three decades old.

All these years, the problem has always been characterised by the NATO (no action, talk only) syndrome.

Various seminars and forums have been held, many studies undertaken, and a lot of papers and memoranda have been produced.

But little has been achieved.

The blame must be apportioned among the State Government (from 1969 to the present day), the State Islamic Religious Affairs Council, Urban Development Authority, the Bumiputera Participation Steering Committee, State Economic Planning Unit (UPEN), Penang Development Corporation, Municipal Council, State Housing Board, Malay Chamber of Commerce, Perda and Yayasan Bumiputera.

Sungai Dua State Assemblyman Jasmin Mohamad said it was a common fallacy to think that Bumiputeras were only facing housing problems in George Town.

"The fact is Bumiputeras are also facing similar housing problems in the urban areas of Seberang Perai such as Butterworth, Bukit Mertajam and

Nibong Tebal."

Jasmin preferred solving the problem area by area rather than having an overall solution which would take up a lot of time.

He also suggested a review of the State policy towards low and medium-cost housing.

Tanjung Umno division leader Datuk Ahmad Ibni Hajar suggested that affordable housing schemes such as two-room flats costing RM30,000 and three-room flats costing RM60,000 should be built for Bumiputeras.

He also proposed the building of more affordable business premises for Bumiputeras in George Town similar to the Penang Road Bazaar.

Ahmad said the State Government and the Municipal Council were not responsive to the many development plans he had submitted to build more houses and business premises for Bumiputeras.

Kampung Manggis Umno branch deputy leader Ramlan Raji said there were many reasons why some continue to live in wooden houses.

"Some may feel comfortable in such houses, but others may do so because they have no other alternative," he said.

"Some who deserve better housing were unsuccessful in their application and yet others who already own houses, still apply and are given houses."

There have been cases where a person who had already obtained a PDC house was also offered another house by the State Housing Board.

Penang Malay Association president Datuk Mohd Yussof Latif said the association had submitted an ambitious proposal to develop Kampung Makam to provide modern high-rise residential and business accommodation.

"To do this, we would have to acquire a seven-acre plot of land in neighbouring Persiaran Perak to resettle the villagers.

"However, sad to say, the authorities we have written to have not bothered to reply till today."

In Penang, State endowed wakaf land, through re-acquisition, amounts to 613.4 hectares while wakaf land owned by the State Islamic Religious Council is 106 hectares and commands a value of over RM100 million.

Former politician Datuk Abdul Latiff Mirasa suggested at a 1999 seminar that a RM100 million fund be established, the amount to be increased to RM1 billion in five years, to develop such land.

He also called for the establishment of an Urban Malay Development Corporation. To date, neither has materialised.

Back in 1993, the State Government allocated RM4 million for the integrated development of the Lebuah Aceh and Lebuah Armenian Muslim enclave as well as some of the wakaf land in the inner city of George Town.

The then Deputy Chief Minister Dr Ibrahim Saad said the primary aim of the project "was to revive the glory days of the area as a modern Malay centre in the 1920s and 30s.

In those days, the area was a popular place of congregation for Malay academicians, writers and prominent traders."

In 1999, the Penang Malay Chamber of Commerce announced that the Lebuah Aceh heritage enclave encompassing over four hectares will be turned into a bustling economic and cultural hub.

It promised housing, space for retail businesses, bazaars, shops, a museum, markets, and restaurants.

Today, a decade later, only the historic Lebuah Aceh Mosque has undergone some repairs, while some tenants of dilapidated shophouses have moved out.

The Syed Alatas Mansion, the proposed Islamic Museum building, still stands vacant and forlorn.

By and large, Lebuah Aceh has remained as it was.

This is an indication of the pace of Penang Bumiputera progress.

The factors and underlying causes of this state of affairs are manifold: lack of political will, red tape, poor planning, lack of foresight,

apathy, gross incompetence, outdated municipal bylaws, political chicanery, corruption, cronyism, incomplete and outdated data, irresponsibility, selfishness, greed and so on.

Take your pick. The situation must first be rectified and an effective strategy implemented before the wheels of progress can start to turn.

Elected representatives, especially those in the State Government, as well as government officers in relevant bodies should show more accountability.

It is their job and responsibility to solve this problem instead of letting it drag on year after year.

Surely it is not such an insurmountable problem.

They should be thoroughly ashamed of themselves if they cannot solve this problem.

But not all is doom and gloom.

On the bright side, there have been small but meaningful successes in Kampung Melayu, Tanjung Tokong, Jelutong, Bayan Baru and Seberang Jaya where affordable highrise flats have been built.

These examples should serve to convince the naysayers and the prophets of doom, as well as spur the laggards to swifter action.