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Dreaming of Nagasaki

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The drive from the Nagasaki airport is pleasant enough but not too spectacular - until you reach the hills just outside the city.

You don't need to be a student of architecture to appreciate how the houses on those majestic highlands are neatly perched and stacked, gradient by gradient, brown bricks against green trees.

From the highway, one can see narrow roads meandering up the slopes and capillary-like lanes leading right up to tiny doors of the homes.

Many of these homes were built not long after the atomic bomb, I was told. The city was flattened by the US at 11.02am on August 9, 1945. Which means they were not new and the technology used to build them was not recent.

I marvelled as I passed those hills during my only visit to Nagasaki as part of Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's delegation on one of his working visits to Japan.

This was several years ago.

The Prime Minister, too, noticed those hills as he spoke at a dinner about clever Japanese who could build houses on hills without levelling them or felling too many trees.

This is not to say that our own developers are less clever or not clever. But if Nagasaki had been located somewhere or anywhere in Malaysia, the chances of those hills surviving in the hands of our developers would range from very, very slim to nil.

Because, like it or not, most of our developers know how to make mole hills out of a mountain better than anyone else.

Last month's expose by the New Straits Times on the blatant hill-cutting in Cameron Highlands, for example, was not an isolated case. The media have exposed too many of such cases in the past.

Dr Mahathir's angry response (calling for developers found guilty of indiscriminate land clearing to be jailed) was also not unprecedented. Many times in the past, before and after Nagasaki, the PM had lashed out strongly and in vain at greedy, environmentally-unfriendly developers and ignorant, uncaring local authorities.

With each telling-off, the authorities concerned would leap into action. A couple of fines later, the cutting of the hills would resume.

We are a country of diminishing hills and green lungs. Most Malaysians are aware of this and are very concerned.

That's why you still read about groups of residents demonstrating and pleading with the local authorities to save their last football field or children's playground from being turned into apartments and other commercial complex.

That's why we still get letters from newspaper readers asking us to check out some suspicious activities on the hills or in the parks near their areas. Some of those complaints lead to ugly discoveries like the indiscriminate land-clearing in Cameron.

But what chance do we have if there are people in local councils, municipalities and ministries who do not give a hoot about what happens to our hills and to our trees?

These are the people who make the decisions to approve or not approve a project, the people who are supposed to ensure that the developers do not cut hills and fell trees, the people who are responsible for playgrounds and fields, the people who have been tasked to protect our green lungs and

forest reserves.

We can jail the developers and impose heavier fines but as long as there are officials, state or federal, who turn their backs to the hill cutting, land clearing and tree felling in their jurisdiction, either because they are too lazy or it benefits them to do so, our hills and our green lungs and our fields and playgrounds will continue to be at risk.

And our developers won't ever need to know how the developers in Nagasaki built those homes on their hills.