

06/02/2003

Flattened by a lack of will

IT is becoming as old as the hills, this recurring debate and periodic reprimand over the indiscriminate and baneful development of our highlands. The Prime Minister has issued his rebuke for the umpteenth time. Read his lips - don't cut the hills. Simple.

Of course, it shouldn't in the first place rest entirely on Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to speak up to get things moving and for the enforcers to act. The laws are already there - whether it is the Land Conservation Act, the National Land Code or other by-laws enacted by State Governments and local authorities. It is now, and has been, a mere question of will.

The Land Conservation Act, for instance, spells out quite clearly instances of illegal land development and clearing of hillslopes as well as the requirement of permits for such activities. There's also provision for jail sentences, but only in default of a maximum RM5,000 fine. Indeed, many other legal provisions connected with the issue are enforceable, including the one recently applied by the Cameron Highlands district council on a company over the use of heavy machinery in the clearing of hillslopes for which a compound fine of RM500 is the penalty.

To debate over which laws the Cameron Highlands authorities should have employed against the culprit would be an academic exercise at this stage. A more critical question would be to determine whether there is indeed a will or resolve among our so-called guardians of the environment to tackle the problem. For instance, if the present laws do not provide adequate penalties, is there a will to change that and, say, make the lawbreakers go to jail? And is there enough resolve to sustain action against hill development?

The latest engagement in the episode has come from Pahang Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Adnan Yaakob, who has ordered an immediate stop to all development work in Cameron Highlands. The statement may have a familiar ring to it, but will be even more effective if followed up with the required commitment and resolve by the enforcing authorities. No more excuses must be tolerated, or else the same situation and state of affairs will go on indefinitely. Tougher action must be taken, if the State Governments, district offices and local councils are not to be seen as beholden to money-grubbing developers and profiteers.