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Need for holistic approach

FLOODS are a natural disaster. But unlike other calamities such as earthquakes and volcanic eruptions, floods are not entirely the acts of nature because the human hand is also at work. Unlike floods caused by monsoon rains, flash floods, like the recent one which inundated parts of central Kuala Lumpur, are the result of unrestrained manmade activities which show a lack of respect for nature. It is true that the rain that fell that afternoon was exceptionally heavy and caused the five rivers that run through the city to overflow. However, it is significant that a government study has established that the confluence of the Klang and Ampang Rivers and that of the Klang and Gombak Rivers can no longer carry storm water during very heavy rain. There is an undeniable link between the rapid urbanisation and industrialisation of the Klang Valley and the frequent flash floods that afflict it. The built-up environment that man has constructed does not absorb water as did the natural ground and vegetation they replaced. The resultant higher run-off after heavy rain, and the deterioration of river capacity as a result of siltation and pollution, lead to frequent flash floods.

It is this cause-effect relationship between development and flooding that has led the Government to recognise that while "structural" measures such as building flood bunds and retention ponds are necessary, they are not sufficient conditions for flood mitigation. This understanding needs to be translated into effective policies to ensure that development takes into account the limits of the carrying capacity of rivers and drains. The key to repairing the damage already done requires abandoning piecemeal approaches. Flooding cannot be separated from other environmental issues such as water pollution or river degradation. Land and water management cannot be separated from each other. Institutional, legislative and regulatory changes are needed to ensure greater co-ordination among all the relevant organisations to achieve the common goal of sustainable development, in which environmental concerns are a pivot element.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's statement that the Government is studying various measures, including the construction of smart tunnels to carry rain water away from flood-prone areas, is reassuring. It is hoped that these measures will solve the problem or at least reduce the frequency and severity of floods in Kuala Lumpur.