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KUALA LUMPUR: Malaysia is shrinking. Literally.

Thousands of lives and millions of ringgit in property are in danger in at least 93 areas of the country as the hungry sea continues to gobble up land.

In 33 areas, the authorities confirmed, we are losing stretches of up to 40 metres of land a year.

Drainage and Irrigation Department (DID) statistics reveal that 223 stretches of our coast — or 1,414km of land — are being eroded.

But coastal folk, especially fishermen, say government figures are too conservative.

They may be right as the number of "critical" areas has increased in the last 10 years, despite government efforts to stem the tide.

In 1986, there were 74 areas on the "critical list" of the DID. Today there are 93.

Nobody was able to say what shape the country would be in, literally, in another 15 years. Much depends on what is done to stop the erosion.

The DID, according to officials, is rowing only with one oar: it lacks money. Because of insufficient funds, rehabilitation work is only being done at 60 of these stretches.

The top beaches in "critical" condition are Pantai Sabak in Kelantan, Bagan Datoh in Perak and the Kuala Sala and Kuala Kangkong stretches in Kedah.

Other tourist spots that are in the same category include Pantai Batu Buruk in Terengganu, Pantai Tanjung Ru in Selangor and Pantai Pulau Besar in Malacca.

"The government gives us an allocation every five years. With this allocation, work can only be done on some of them. Sometimes, only part of the whole stretch can be worked on," said DID coastal engineering division engineer Ong Hon Lim.

Every state, except the Federal Territories of Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya, has stretches of shoreline in the "critical" stage.

The DID classifies a "critical" area as one where erosion has reached a stage where it endangers life or property or both.

A "significant" area is one which is likely to fall into the "critical" category in the next five years while an "acceptable" area is one where erosion is not serious and does not endanger life or property.

DID director-general Datuk Keizrul Abdullah said of the 223 coastal areas under siege, 57 (193.3km) were in the "significant" stage while 73 (932.8km) were in the "acceptable" stage.

He said the states with the worst coastal erosion were Kelantan (73.4 per cent of the coastal area), Perlis (72.5 per cent) and Selangor (71.3 per cent).

Malaysia faces huge losses in lives, property

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"For Pantai Sabak in Kelantan, erosion has taken away a stretch of 200 metres in the last 10 years."

However, the state with the most number of beaches in the "critical" category is Kedah with 16 beaches, followed by Pahang with 11 beaches, and Selangor with 10.

Keizrul said erosion was caused by sea currents, called "littoral drifts", and human activity.

"When we protect a coast eroding naturally, we create a hard shell over it. By doing this, we just shift the erosion elsewhere.

"The same goes for reclamation work. Imagine a coastline with a moving current and you reclaim a part of it. When you disturb the sediment flow, the erosion will just be felt elsewhere," he said.

Physical development work near the shoreline also contributes to erosion.

DID guidelines call for development at sandy beaches to be at least 60m from the shoreline and work at muddy or mangrove swamps to be 400m from the shoreline.

But no one bothers as these guidelines do not have the force of law.

Keizrul said the DID had two ways of dealing with erosion — short-term curative measures and long-term preventive measures.

Short-term measures include placing large rocks or linking concrete blocks, called "revetment", on the beach to absorb the force of the waves. Another way is to induce sedimentation by placing "groynes", which are structures built into the sea, to keep the sand within the zone created by it.

For beaches with aesthetic value such as Batu Ferringhi in Penang and Port Dickson in Negri Sembilan, Keizrul said placing rocks would mean there would no longer be a beach.

"Here we do something called "beach nourishment" where we bring in sand to the beach. Since the sea will eventually take this sand away, we have to do this once every five years," he said.

Preventive measures include the implementation of an Integrated Shoreline Management Plan (ISMP) for the various states, which includes the setting up of zones and controlling development in sensitive areas.