



Whither Accountability?

When it comes to credibility and accepting responsibility for the many environmental fiascos that have taken place in the country, the local councils seem to be averse to any such thing. In the meantime, the *rakyat* continue to pay, many with their lives. What will it take for them to buck up?

ON FEB 17, 2006, the Federal Court made a historic judgment. It was one that would change the landscape relating to the accountability and responsibilities of local councils throughout the country.

The Court ruled that the Ampang Jaya Municipal Council (MPAJ) in Selangor was not liable for the collapse of the Highland Towers condominium that claimed 48 lives in December 1993.

While the decision sent shock waves around the country, the local authorities around the country were, no doubt, heaving a sigh of relief. They were comforted by the fact that under the law, they were at least immunised against liability, even for being negligent.

This is, to simple people, mind-boggling. When the government and the Prime Minister were held liable, the local councils were not. Something is fundamentally wrong. Laws pertaining to the liability of local authorities should be amended.

Since then, there have been fears amongst ratepayers that given this false sense of security, local councils, including City Halls, would neglect their duties with impunity.

We only have to read in the media about the increasing number of such allegations. It is becoming increasingly common for ratepayers to have their complaints ignored, giving rise to allegations of corruption, abuse of power and mismanagement.

For example, the latest example of complaints by the residents in Hulu Klang is just one of the many instances of blatant disregard for the environment and dereliction of duty by a local council.

It is unthinkable how residents' complaints and pleas had been ignored until finally it took a tragic landslide to highlight their plight. By which time, it was too late as at least four people had been buried alive and scores injured. In 2002, a similar landslide occurred in the area where eight members of a family were killed. It just goes to show that local councils and their political mates never learn their lessons.

Recently, more reports of negligence surfaced in the media. And in all the mudslinging, it took an order from

the Prime Minister himself to the ignorant Datuk Bandar to see for himself what was happening.

How many more times must the Prime Minister, with his busy schedule, order lethargic local council chiefs or Chief Ministers to *turun padang* or go down to the ground? Are they so averse to sunlight that they cannot leave their air-conditioned offices?

And even when they do *turun padang*, more excuses are given. All the Datuk Bandar could offer in this instance was a feeble 'we can't stop the development as we have to consider all views'. Never mind that the project was on a hill slope. Never mind that there was massive soil erosion and never mind that four people had just been buried alive in a nearby development.

Of course, the Mayor is not new to controversy. Soon after his appointment, there were some serious allegations against him in a book. The author of the book was subsequently cleared by the Police, but the Mayor decided he would not pursue the matter to clear his name.

Then, of course, we have the numerous instances of floods, trees being uprooted and illegal buildings springing up in Kuala Lumpur. For example, a giant furniture mall is sprouting up in a residential area despite strong objections from residents that it is a safety hazard. Such examples just go to show the total disregard the Mayor and his officials have for ratepayers.

But what surely takes the cake is the sealing of City Hall headquarters a few months ago when its legal department defied a court order. The level of inefficiency displayed was simply pathetic. As usual, no one accepted responsibility for the fiasco but the finger pointing was swift.

So, what does it take for local authorities to pull up their socks? Let's face it. Except for a handful of dedicated staff, the majority never will.

But here's food for thought for council staff. The next time there is a disaster, it might just be your loved ones who may lose their lives.

By then, it will be too late to finger point or shed tears. **mb**