

Past floods hold solutions

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NSTnation: By assessing the strengths and weaknesses of strategies employed back then, it is possible to learn from past errors and turn them into successes for the future.

“CAN you give me a hand by unloading those stacks of old newspapers from the back of the van while I attend to some urgent matters at home? It will not take long, and if other customers turn up, just tell them to come back later,” requested the middle-aged man soon after I arrived at his recycling centre in Jalan Gangsa, Kedah.

With their help, I have secured the possession of important historical documents and other printed materials, which would otherwise have been destined for the shredding machine.

Then, just as I was about to resign myself to fate, the last few stacks that were hidden from sight came into full view. Hoping against hope of finding something better, I “lunged” forward to take a better look.

spanning two decades beginning from the late 1950s!

Most badly affected were villages in Kelantan and Terengganu, where basic necessities quickly became short in supply.

At the same time, rice and flour were despatched by boat to Kampung Naga Ibu and Kuala Jambu at the Thai-Malayan border about 30m from Tumpat after a distress call was sent out for supplies.

With the Telaga Batin airstrip (now Sultan Mahmud Airport) under 0.6m of fast rising water, air services to the eastern seaboard were cancelled for nearly a week, and both states had to go without newspapers throughout that duration.

While the effect was usually relatively tame, the massive inundation that began during the last few days of 1966 was particularly severe and affected many other states, apart from Kelantan and Terengganu.

Conditions deteriorated so rapidly and the devastation was so bad that the world stood up and took notice.

While the situation in the flood stricken states in Peninsular Malaysia began to improve gradually towards the middle of January 1967, Tunku Abdul Rahman took to the airwaves and urged Malaysians from all walks of life to contribute generously to the National Disaster Relief Fund, which had snowballed to more than RM300,000.

He assured Malaysians that his deputy, Tun Abdul Razak Hussein, was in constant contact to supplying him with the latest reports on the situation deep into the wee hours each day.

The RMAF fleet comprising helicopters, Scottish Aviation Twin Pioneer transport planes and Handley Page Dart Herald turboprop aircraft were stationed in the affected states for general relief work.

There, eight of its heavy-lifting twin-engine helicopters were engaged in transporting rice to villages cut off by floodwaters. The commando ship was equipped with 20 Wessex helicopters, each capable of lifting 15 men or their equivalent weight in supplies.

That interesting article focused on the Great Flood of 1926 as a classic case in point.

The prognosis proved true within a day as by then, the government offices in Jalan Raja were under a metre of water and people had to commute to work in sampan, rickshaws and bullock carts.

All rail services passing north out of Kuala Lumpur were suspended, affecting mail, passengers and freight.

In terms of providing assistance, the colonial government at that time was caught flat-footed as it was preoccupied with advancing development policies.

Due to the lack of preparedness, most of the relief efforts had to be provided by well-meaning individuals and private associations.

Apart from Kuala Lumpur, the Great Flood of 1926 entailed severe inundations that affected large proportions of rural peninsula north of Kuala Lumpur, including Selangor, Perak, Pahang and Kelantan.

At the same time, the private railway that linked the plantations to mines in Sungai Lembing, Pahang, was partially washed away, and trains had to be dug out of the mud after the water subsided.

The ecological, social, and political ramifications are extensive and have far reaching effects. Apart from affecting the livelihood of those affected, severe inundation have the power to cause shifts in focus on the local industry.

Returning thoughts to the present day, it is admittedly true that despite all the costly mitigation schemes enacted over the years to reduce the effect of flooding, they do not always prove to be effective.

By assessing the strengths and weaknesses of strategies employed back then, it is possible to learn from past errors and turn them into successes for the future.

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