



Bigger force won't cut crime rate

I RECEIVED an SMS from a former colleague last week that read: "Crime and vigilantism. MCA now operating vigilante corps in Wangsa Maju. Sad."

In Wangsa Maju, a suburb of Kuala Lumpur, a college student recently died from injuries inflicted by snatch thieves. Naturally, we are outraged and alarmed and we want to do something about it.

There have been a series of high-profile petty crimes in urban areas gone wrong lately, largely snatch thefts for handphones and a few ringgit that have resulted in deaths.

Many citizens are in fear and there is talk of forming crime prevention groups. Some have the intention of deterring crime by making their presence felt, while others are looking at catching criminals and meting out their own justice.

We have read reports of criminals apprehended and pummelled to near death before being handed over to the police. At times, we must admit that, in our desperation and haplessness, we would like to get our hands on the child rapists and murderers. But what would that make us?

We obviously blame the criminals and then, for some others, the police force. A few banners and signs carried by a group of protesters in Johor Baru recently questioned why the police were not doing much to prevent the rise in crime.

Sensing the mood, politicians and commentators have weighed in with opportunistic statements that do nothing but stoke anger and fear. Calling for the police to be more vigilant and professional is so easy, even as they do nothing to promote policing, either in combating crime or helping to beef up the force.

While it is not wrong to call for better policing, there were many statements from community leaders, including politicians, that were thinly veiled attacks on the professionalism of the force.

Sometimes, they are from the very same people who have over the last year or so been vocal in systematically running down the force.

Remember the uproar and political opportunism that arose over the nude-squat incident that painted negatively in broad strokes the integrity



Members of the Home Guards (auxiliary police) helping to ensure security in the old days.

and credibility of the entire force from the acts of a few?

Let us not be too hasty in our criticism of the police. Many of us have subcontracted the job of ensuring our security to the men in blue, so that we can go about our daily lives and business. Many of us and our businesses have prospered because of the relative peace and security provided by them.

We have taken for granted that we could do what we please and not have to worry about criminals spoiling our day.

But crime exists. It is everywhere. It is a fact of life, and it is not something new. The fact that most of our homes are fortified with grilles, locks and alarms suggest that we have

accepted that it exists.

Most crimes are committed in largely underprivileged neighbourhoods and communities. It is well-known that criminals often prey on those close by. It is only when they start to expand beyond their comfort zones, invading our spaces — in the streets, alleyways, parks, shopping complexes — that we feel vulnerable and threatened.

The Government wants to increase the number of policemen and police stations, and put more policemen on the beat, and no less than the Cabinet has directed that security be improved in the suburbs of Kuala Lumpur.

Now, looking at the number of policemen we have, that

would be near impossible.

There are close to 90,000 police personnel in the country, or about one for every 260 Malaysians. That looks quite a bit, but the number includes the Inspector-General of Police all the way down to clerks and general workers.

There are also 837 police stations, or about one station for every 30,000 Malaysians. Considering the density of the urban areas, the number of policemen and police stations relative to the population is probably much lower.

Obviously, from the numbers, we can either have more policemen and policewomen, or more help from citizens. But the solution to the crime problem is not a bigger force.

There could never be enough policemen if we are to leave the matter of our safety entirely to them. Our tax ringgit can never be enough.

The police are there to uphold the law. All the solutions offered to combat crime — more patrols and closed-circuit surveillance — do not address the main issue of the seeming rise in crime.

Crime is not a policing issue, it is a society issue. This is not a New Age thinking, but a reality. We must look at the root of the problem that leads us to produce criminals.

For any crime prevention strategy to work, there is a need for people to not only co-operate, but also look into the environment that breeds

would be criminals.

When a person picks someone's pocket, it is not the fault of the police. When pockets of the community are displaced, feeling helpless, crime happens. I would like to believe that most criminals are not programmed in their genes to be criminals.

The other issue that we must be very careful about, as we set up neighbourhood watches and crime prevention groups, is why we are doing so. Is it to help the police or are we showing signs that our confidence in the force is eroding?

The latter is dangerous as it could take us down the path of vigilantism, and that is no help at all to preserving law and order.