



# The Denial Syndrome

While we continue to see our competitiveness as a nation slide, many of us resort to blaming others for our predicament. When will we see the truth for what it is?

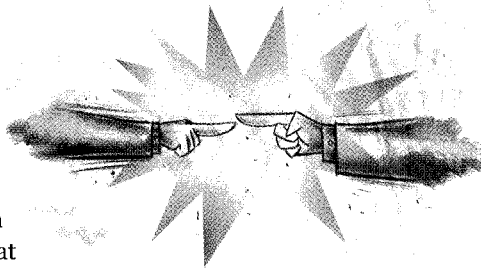
FEB 25, 2006 was a black day for residents of TTDI Jaya in Shah Alam. That was the day their houses were covered with water and their cars were submerged while they were fast asleep. Three thousand families had to be evacuated and 1,000 cars were submerged. Even the stadium was under water. We are talking of a prime area in Shah Alam in the well-developed state of Selangor here and not some East Coast state known for its seasonal floods. As a consequence, piped water became smelly due to the garbage landfill, oxidation ponds and effluents from animal farms spilling into the main river which supplies water to the people of the Klang Valley. It is unthinkable that such a situation had occurred in the self-acknowledged, fully developed state of Selangor. One would have thought that the relevant government departments such as the Drainage and Irrigation Department would have looked at the possibility of such a spill. A statement from the privatised water company absolved itself from the cause of the smelly water. I guess its responsibility is just to supply water regardless of whether it is colourful or smelly. Like everything else, it took a catastrophe like the flash flood, which caused severe financial damage and hardship to the people, for the powers that be to wake up and do something like making sure garbage is not thrown near water catchment areas, or animal farms are not allowed near major rivers used for drinking water, or that even a proper drainage system exists

for townships and new market centres. Apparently, some 70% of landfills are near rivers or water catchment areas.

Actually, the problem of flash floods seems to be popping up all over the place; on highways, in the streets of Kuala Lumpur, etc. It only takes a few minutes of heavy rain to trigger one. Either we lack the skills to know what is required to match the rapid rate of development everywhere, or those responsible simply choose to ignore them. Take the disposal of toxic waste in Labis recently by a company in Melaka as an example. Incidents of toxic

waste disposal are becoming very frequent these days, perhaps because the violators are not sufficiently punished for their wrongdoings. The continuous disregard for the environment seems to suggest that enforcement is weak in most cases, and sometimes, it takes an exposé by a private television station for the authorities to act. The irony sometimes is that there are cases of indiscriminate disposal of garbage in non-designated areas, indiscriminate clearing of jungle and logging, even in areas designated as forest reserves, which the authorities are aware of but don't take any action on. Smells like corruption.

Almost every other day, we hear of reports of irresponsible developers cheating members of the public, of incomplete construction of dwellings, of incidents of people losing their hard-earned life savings on shoddy workmanship of houses or flats they



have bought and developers continuing to ignore complaints and grievances of house buyers. The Ministry of Housing and Local Government looks helpless in curbing these problems and so do the local councils. In fact, sometimes, I wonder whether the existence of local councils actually helps or hinders proper development. Take the case of the wet market in Jalan Chow Kit, which has been in the present state for the last 50 years! It is crowded and filthy. Surely, with the expansion and development that has taken place over the years in Kuala Lumpur, the people of KL deserve a better wet market. When dry markets were introduced some years ago in several areas in KL, people wondered why they were not made to be user-friendly. Climbing up or down the stairs could kill anybody with a weak heart. In one particular dry market, the construction of an escalator was abandoned mid-way, perhaps because the contractor

'Muslims in public' by a religious authority. It took a Cabinet decision to nullify the move!

In the meantime, our competitiveness as a nation is slowly waning, from number 16 in 2004 to number 27 in 2005. The major factors taken into account in evaluating competitiveness of nations are economic efficiency, business efficiency, government efficiency and infrastructure. It is easy for anyone to dismiss such reports as insignificant, as after all, the figures show our economy and trade surpluses doing well. When we first started in the seventies, we were not very far behind Singapore, Korea, Taiwan and Hong Kong. Now, not only have they left us far behind, even Thailand has beaten us. Take agriculture for example. We cannot say our agriculture is better than the Thais. We sell bananas to Singapore and they repackage it and label it as a product of Singapore! Anyone for a bet that it is not just confined to bananas? Every year,

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employed to do the job either lacked the finances or the skills to complete the job. It shows the lackadaisical attitude of the authorities.

At the bottom of the whole issue is perhaps the truth about what has been said about having first-class infrastructure and a third-class mentality. We seem to not be able to cope with the problem of growth. We have cracked highways, traffic jams of four to five hours on major highways and blatant disregard for the environment. Our rivers are dirty, and yet we drink water from them. We let garbage, oxidation ponds and animal effluents to spill into our drinking water with one authority blaming another and absolving responsibility.

On another front, we also have incidents of irresponsible people being allowed to supply food items with no regard for religious sensitivities, indiscriminate usage of the *halal* label when it is not, and pirated music and video operators peddling their ware openly. The favourite spots for raids by the authorities must surely be the entertainment outlets. There was even a ridiculous suggestion to form a 'spying' group to spy on the 'indecent' behaviour of

we import no less than RM11 billion worth of foodstuff.

In the meantime, one may ask whatever happened to the seven flagships of the Multimedia Super Corridor? How many of the seven are flying? While we talk all the time of China becoming a major economic powerhouse, we have another to catch up fast to, India. Its stock markets are booming and 40% of the outsourcing needs of the United States is handled by Bangalore. In contrast, our stock market is languishing at the bottom of the table, our major companies are losing money (after years of operations) and even Indonesia, with bombs exploding all over the place, has registered over 16% growth in its market index. Our market, performance-wise, used to be ahead of Singapore and Thailand for years. Now, they have beaten us in terms of volume and value, and when the FT Global Index dropped 10 of our counters, we continued our self-denial by saying 'they have changed the calculations of liquidity'. It reminds me of the famous Malay proverb, 'Don't blame the floor for not being level if you don't know how to dance'. **imb**

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