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Newly set up disaster management agency proves its mettle

Nadma had everything under control from day one as it coordinated rescue operations by various agencies

IN only its second year as an umbrella body to tackle disasters in the country, the National Disaster Management Agency, or Nadma, has again proven its ability to coordinate all relevant agencies to provide the necessary support to minimise the traumatic experience of disaster victims.

It has also proven its reliability to act immediately anytime and anywhere at very short notice, which speaks a lot about its preparedness in managing disasters and promptly mobilising assets from lead ministries, departments and agencies.

The floods that struck Terengganu and Kelantan just after the nation celebrated the new year and subsided after the 10th day of the month were expected, but its severity, which was triggered by unusual heavy rainfall in the interior and coincided with the high-tide phenomenon caught many by surprise.

At the height of the floods, more than 13,500 people from 150 low-lying villages in seven districts in Terengganu were evacuated. The good news was that this year's flood recorded zero fatalities, which reflected improved awareness on the potential dangers posed by floods.

Nadma had everything under control from day one of the flood as it managed rescue operations handled by agencies such as the Fire and Rescue Department, Civil Defence Department, the army, police, district offices and the Welfare Department.

The Fire and Rescue Department and the Civil Defence Department, for example, held flood rescue simulation exercises a couple of months before the disaster hit late December last year. The police diverted traffic from dangerous inundated stretches; the army used its assets to move people and the district and Welfare Department controlled supplies at the forward bases.

The early fear that Nadma would take over the functions of other agencies fizzled out because it did not interfere in the operations, but took in all the reports to ensure that operations were coordinated to



A village in Tumpat, Kelantan. The floods that hit interior villages in Kelantan and Terengganu were unprecedented. FILE PIC

avoid duplication.

Nadma would also use the information to maximise the use of assets deployed by the various agencies and to minimise the traumatic experience of flood victims. This information is useful when it conducts post-mortem to assess its efficiency and recommends what else that could be done.

On the flood itself, the heavy rain in the interior was unexpected. Villages not accustomed to floods rising up to waist high were baffled at the phenomenon because even during the big floods of 2009 and 2013, the villages were not affected by the disaster.

The theory about the changing weather patterns could be true. It was acknowledged by Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Ahmad Zahid Hamidi when he met flood victims at Kampung Bukit Tadok in Kuala Berang.

Every year, the monsoon would unleash heavy rainfall beginning November, but this year it struck the mainland in late December, a delay of about a month. When it arrived on the eve of New Year, it came with a vengeance pouring non-stop for more than 24 hours.

A villager at Kampung Tengkwang in Kuala Berang, Ton Abdul Wahab Ton Ibrahim, 62, said one does not need to be a rocket scientist to understand why the interior villages were flooded within a short period.

He identified logging and cutting of hills for development, including agriculture, as the culprits that contributed to the floods.

The same reason was given by a villager in Pulau Redang, Kutab Ibrahim, 62, who said that the recent flood was the worst he had experienced in his entire life on the island and blamed it partly on development and poor drainage.

The occurrence of landslide that

blocked a road leading to the village further reinforced his belief that clearing of the forest may have contributed to the disaster.

Both Ton Abdul Wahab and Kutab have seen how the forests near their villages were cleared for development and both were of the opinion that mitigation measures against any form of disaster should be given priority before the projects are approved.

In both cases, the villages were inundated by unstoppable run-off from higher grounds because lands have been cleared of trees. The forest, which absorbs about 15 per cent of rain, is the first defence against floods.

However, it cannot be dismissed that a combination of factors contributed to the floods. Some of these factors, like logging and clearing of land bordering forest reserves for agriculture or other developments, are obvious and can be mitigated with a more stringent control.

The changing weather pattern, however, is beyond our control. But, scientists all over the world have acknowledged that the greenhouse effect caused by the emission of excessive carbon dioxide had contributed to the changing weather pattern.

If that is so, the floods this year could be a warning that the situation could only worsen in future. But, then again, the changing weather pattern is already affecting the world climate as evidenced from snow falling in the desert and torrential rain in unlikely places everywhere in the world.

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