

Heed lessons from Cameron Highlands tragedy

COMPROMISES: There has to be a balance between economic pursuits and looking after the environment

CAMERON Highlands was in the news recently but not for the right reason. Instead of its usual portrayal as a tourist haven, this time around the story was about a disaster which could have been avoided. A disaster which has resulted from man's own failings.

The waterways which were supposed to absorb the sudden release of dam water were heavily silted and could not cope with the deluge. The disaster in the form of mud flows was imminent.

Looking at the pictures which were splashed in the media, they looked no different from the tsunami that wreaked havoc in Aceh in 2004 or the Fukushima debacle in 2012.

Houses were destroyed. Cars were squashed. Casualties included three deaths and one still missing. It was a sad day for the people in the affected area, many losing their belongings and their properties destroyed. In fact all Malaysians mourned that day. Unless we learn from that unfortunate incident, it can happen again anywhere.

There are lessons from that catastrophic day in Cameron Highlands. Lessons which we should all use to guide future development in areas with similar topography.

Only a few weeks ago we were alerted to the fact that the tourism industry in Cameron Highlands is affected by the illegal clearing of land for agriculture activities, which also adversely impacts the



This unfortunate incident in Cameron Highlands can happen again if measures are not taken to protect the environment and eco-system.

environment in the area.

Natural Resources and Environment Minister Datuk Seri G. Palanivel, who also happens to be the member of parliament for Cameron Highlands, said there had been a decline in the number of local visitors and tourists from countries like Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan and Japan to the highlands.

He admitted that illegal clearing of land is a big problem to the residents of Cameron Highlands. He further urged non-governmental organisations to play their role in helping to control the situation.

Everyone agrees there has to be a balance between economic pursuits such as agriculture and tourism with looking after the environment. At the end of the day, if the ecosystem services of nature are compromised, both agriculture and tourism cannot be sustained. And worse still, the safety of the people may be compromised eventually.

The problem is agriculture in Cameron Highlands contributes

over RM2 billion worth of exports every year. It is big business.

It is not easy to limit further expansion of cultivated areas. Therefore the rampant encroachment on environmentally sensitive areas has proceeded almost unabated. As they say, greed will always rule.

It has been reported that for the past 15 years, land clearing has continued unabated in Cameron Highlands but never before on such a large scale as in recent years. The residents of Cameron Highlands inadvertently bear the brunt of the environmental destruction, including contaminated drinking water and polluted rivers.

In almost all the villages stretching from Ringlet, Bertam Valley to Kampung Raja and Blue Valley, the risk of landslides is real.

The situation is not helped by the fact that nowadays temperatures in Cameron Highlands have increased. In the early days, Malaysians would adjourn to Cameron Highlands to get a feel of the "English weather". This is no longer the case.

Some blame the global phenomenon of climate change for the warm weather, but environmen-

talists also take offence at the rampant illegal clearing of land.

There have been calls for a reprieve on the agricultural expansion in the highlands. Unfortunately such warnings were not heeded.

Now that disaster has struck, as usual, promises of remedial measures are made.

The Forestry Research Institute of Malaysia has been asked to carry out reforestation to keep Cameron Highlands cool. A number of departments including the Department of Environment, Drainage and Irrigation Department (DID) and Forestry Department have been tasked to carry out efforts to rehabilitate and preserve the environment in Cameron Highlands.

These measures are well and good and should also be considered for similar areas in the country waiting to experience a repeat of the calamities in Cameron Highland.

Experts on disaster prediction have cited the Lojing Highlands in Kelantan as a case to be closely monitored. Otherwise the lessons of Cameron Highlands will remain unheeded! That would be a sad day for sustainable development.



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