

The worst is yet to come

Exclusive



**'We didn't hear
the
dam siren'**

The people's paper
Star

It's just too much

TNB Cameron Highlands Power Station general manager Mustafa Hashim and Regional Environmental Awareness Cameron Highlands president R. Ramakrishnan pointing out the huge pile of rubbish pulled daily from Lake Ringlet, which is the Sultan Abu Bakar hydroelectric dam reservoir. In the background are the dam's spillway gates which tower above Bertam Valley.

— CHAN TAK KONG / The Star

The Sultan Abu Bakar hydroelectric dam is a ticking time-bomb, waiting to rain down death and destruction on the Bertam Valley. It has already wreaked havoc once and will do so again unless farmers and residents there clean up their act.

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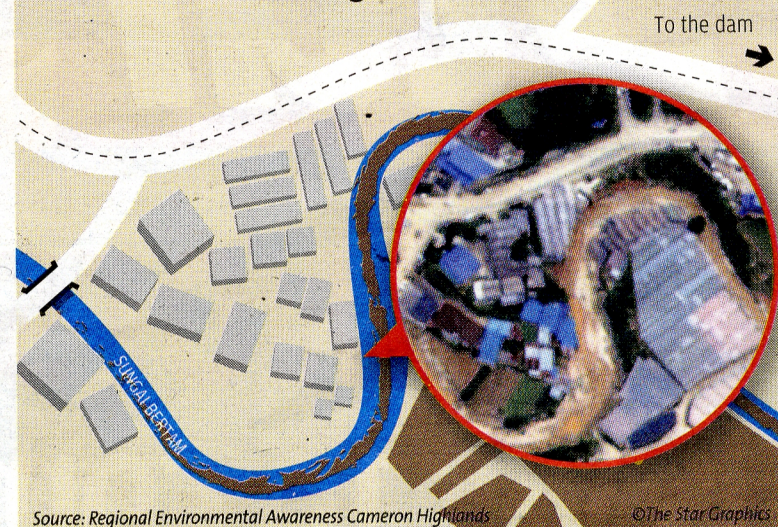
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Mud-coated town: Damaged buildings spotted within the Sungai Bertam river reserve after the mud flood. — CHAN TAK KONG / The Star

Aerial view of buildings within the river reserve



Source: Regional Environmental Awareness Cameron Highlands

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Waiting to spill over

Lake Ringlet is in critical condition

By ISABELLE LAI
isabellelai@thestar.com.my

CAMERON HIGHLANDS: The Sultan Abu Bakar hydroelectric dam reservoir is a major flood disaster waiting to happen.

Reckless farming practices over the years have caused major silting and rubbish to clog up the dam, taking a toll on the structure.

It can only hold up to a third of its maximum capacity now – a mere 1.5 million cubic metres instead of a maximum 4.6 million cubic metres.

This means excess water in the reservoir, known as Lake Ringlet, could reach the danger level more quickly than planned for, especially in the event of downpours.

At that point, the water would be released either manually in controlled stages or automatically if it reached the dam's maximum overflow point.

This would endanger the settlements in the valley below, depending on how much water is released and the speed at which it flows down.

Tenaga Nasional Bhd (TNB), which manages the dam, has spent RM180mil over the past five years to deal with the constant influx of silt, sand and rubbish that is clogging up the facility.

Mustafa Hashim, TNB Cameron Highlands power stations general manager, said the condition of the lake has reached a critical level.

More than a tonne of rubbish – a pile the size of a small lorry – is pulled from Lake Ringlet daily.

"We find just about anything in the lake, including old TV sets. We like to call this the biggest dumping site in the whole of Cameron Highlands," Mustafa said.

Also, a staggering 400,000 cubic metres of sand and silt is dredged up from the reservoir each year. This is

coming from land clearing activities upstream, according to him.

The deterioration of the reservoir is obvious because its once clear water is now a muddy brown, with sedimentation piled up so heavily that sandbanks are visible on its surface.

Mustafa does not know how long TNB can sustain such clean-up operations.

"The problem is not only jeopardising our power station, but also creating a very dangerous situation where the water level can rise quickly and cause massive flooding in the Bertam Valley," he said.

He said the volume of sedimentation and rubbish is now so great that the dam's intake screen, made up of cast iron bars, clogs up dangerously whenever heavy rains fall.

The intake screen, measuring 30ft wide and 20ft high, serves as a filter to prevent anything other than water from flowing into an underground

tunnel leading to the Sultan Yusoff hydroelectric power station.

Recently, residents living along Sungai Bertam – which absorbs the excess water from the dam – had a taste of what could happen in the event of a flood disaster.

The intake screen had clogged on Oct 22, causing the water level at the dam to rise drastically while the station's four generators had stopped working from the interrupted water flow.

The water level in the reservoir had risen up to 13 times faster than normal, due also to a flash flood at Sungai Ringlet. Both Sungai Bertam and Sungai Ringlet flow into Lake Ringlet.

Pouring rain had put the dam in danger of overflowing and the water had to be released in three controlled gushes into the river.

Even then, that had resulted in flash floods that killed three people,

destroyed about 100 houses and damaged more than 100 vehicles.

The majority of the damage was done to structures within the river reserve – a buffer zone where no settlements or human activities are supposed to exist.

Despite the clean-up work, Mustafa said, the amount being cleared is not enough to counter the sheer volume of silt and rubbish flowing in.

"Our worry is that the whole lake will be silted up and there won't be a lake any more. The farmers are simply throwing all their rubbish into the rivers, including rotting vegetables, and it all washes into Lake Ringlet," he said.

The Star has repeatedly highlighted such irresponsible practices, which are causing grave damage to the highlands, but these seem to be falling on deaf ears because strong enforcement has yet to be seen.