

Danger hovers over Camerons

ILLEGAL ACTIVITIES:

The Sungai Bertam tragedy has failed to stop farmers from farming along river reserves, buffer zones, roadsides and hilly terrain

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Even the spot where the body of the last victim was found was not spared, with preparations being made to plant flowers and vegetables.

A farmer, who wanted to be known only as Kamaluddin and operates a strawberry farm in Habu, some distance from Bertam Valley, said those affected by the floods were back in business within just a few days of the tragedy.

"They know that the river is off-limits because of the widening project, but they just can't be bothered."

"The debris from the floods was cleared within days and you can see the plots of vegetables now ready for harvesting."

The more than 80 houses destroyed in the incident had also been rebuilt, he said.

"Replacing the old dilapidated shacks and semi-wooden houses washed away by floods are concrete houses built close to each other mainly for their workers, who are mostly Indonesians and Bangladeshis."

"I believe they have built stronger houses to withstand future disasters and minimise losses, not because they really care for their workers or their safety."

Poor turnout at a massive mock evacuation drill organised by several agencies, including Tenaga Nasional Berhad, which operates the dam, is a case in point.

Following the incident, Cameron Highlands Fire and Rescue Department chief Yusry Mohd Sani said TNB, along with several government departments and agencies, decided to hold the drill for Bertam Valley farmers and their workers.

Only 15 of the more than 1,500 farmers turned up for the drill that saw sirens and klaxons being triggered, water released from the dam and nearby roads closed.

In contrast, the agencies were all out in force, namely from TNB, the District and Land Office, police, Health Department, Fire and Rescue Department, Drainage and Irrigation Department and Rela.

Yusry, who was away on the day of the drill to attend a course but was instrumental in planning the exercise, said he was told that the farm-



The Oct 23 flash floods that killed three people failed to serve as a reminder to the farmers in Bertam Valley. Almost every metre of the Sungai Bertam river reserve is dotted with rows of leafy greens and flowers. Pix by L. Manimaran

ers had refused to participate.

"I was told that they (farmers) said it was just a *sandiwara* (drama) and that the tragedy had happened, so there was no point in taking part."

"I guess they just didn't want to waste their time."

He said notices and leaflets were distributed a week before the drill.

"The poor turnout will not stop us or other government agencies from holding similar drills in the future," he told NST at his office.

Yusry said the department was compiling information on new high-risk, flood- and landslide-prone areas to be shared with other enforcement agencies.

"We are also identifying more evacuation centres for the residents here, in case a disaster strikes. This

is part of our pre-disaster plans."

TNB, he said, had taken a proactive move to clear sediment and silt in the dam, with clearing works being carried out round the clock.

Civil servant Kamaluddin Abdullah, who was posted here three years ago, said there was no solution in sight to the problem of illegal land clearing in Bertam Valley.

"Even first-time visitors to the valley say that it is not impossible for a disaster to strike again."

"Just look at the extent the land is being cleared."

"It is almost impossible to stop them (the farmers)."

Bertam Valley Residents Association chairman Wong Fook Chai said applications had been made to Cameron Highlands Land and Dis-

trict Office to allow the farmers to cultivate along the river reserve until March.

"We have asked that farming be allowed until March."

On the poor response towards the drill, Wong said the farmers did not take it seriously as it was just an exercise.

"However, my committee members did their part before the drill to distribute the leaflets and notices and went door-to-door to ask them to join the exercise."

In the Oct 23 incident, which occurred about 1am, more than 100 vehicles were damaged, including some which were completely written off. SJK (C) Bertam Valley was also badly affected.

In January 2000, the nation was

stunned when a landslide killed seven Orang Asli in Kampung Raja near here.

The Tanah Rata-Brinchang road tragedy also cut off links to more than 15,000 people living in Blue Valley Estate and Kampung Raja.

On Feb 25, 2004, it experienced another disaster when a massive landslide hit Habu in Ringlet, cutting off Tanah Rata and the upper parts of Cameron Highlands via Tapah.

The road was closed for about a week.

Although there were no casualties, the incident disrupted the delivery of fresh vegetables and flowers to other parts of the country, Singapore and Japan. Additional reporting by Sylvia Looi