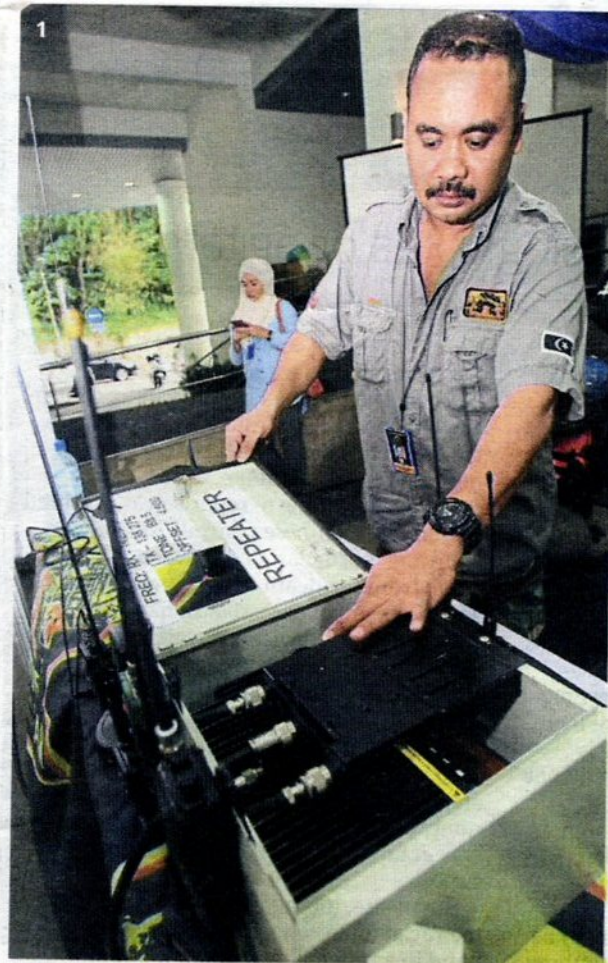




1 Cukai Adventure Team member Mohd Sukri Yaakob demonstrating the 'Repeater' communication system at an exhibition on flood preparations by the Kemaman district at Lembaga Pertubuhan Peladang Tower in Kuala Lumpur.

2 The Federal Agricultural Marketing Authority 'Starter Food Kit' includes food that requires no or minimum cooking.



Ready, come hell or high water

Stories by SHAHANAAZ HABIB
shaz@thestar.com

When it comes to planning for floods, Kemaman has set a high benchmark.

IF it rains in Kemaman between Dec 11 and Dec 14 and between Dec 24 and 28, there will be floods for sure, says the area's senior assistant district officer Che Ku Mohd Izmuddin Che Ku Mahmood without hesitation.

He bases this on a calendar drawn up by the Department of Irrigation and Drainage (DID) in the area on dates the tide is at its highest at this coastal Terengganu district.

"During high tide, the water can rise up to 3.5m. And if it rains during high tide, it is not a 'maybe' but a definite 'yes' that it will flood."

On average, Kemaman gets 3,000mm of rain every year. But Izmuddin says for this year there has been only 1,700mm of rain so far.

"So we are expecting another 1,200mm to come down by the end of the year!"

"Look at what happened in 2013 when Kemaman had its worst floods ever in its history. We had more than 700mm of rain come down in just three days," he says.

During the 2013 floods, which he

describes as "Doomsday Kemaman", the power supply and phone lines were cut off leaving people anxious and panicky over whether their loved ones were safe.

And when the food supply began running low, people "almost" broke into shops.

Reeling from that experience, a year later Kemaman put in place detailed pre-, during, and post-flood preparations, which are so well thought out that they have set the gold standard for handling floods in the country.

It has all the government agencies and departments – such as the district office, town council, police, armed forces, fire department, air force, civil defence, DID, Health Ministry, welfare department, Youth And Sports Ministry, doctors, nurses, and volunteers – working hand in hand with the people, and the duties of "who does what" are so well organised that they flow almost seamlessly.

Asset-wise, too, the town has done a great job.

There are three helipads for heli-

copters to use for rescue or as a spot to drop supplies.

The area also has about 100 boats at its disposal to use during the floods, including 15 big boats from the "fishermen squad".

It can also count on 50 4X4 vehicles from the Cukai Adventure Team, NGOs, and individuals.

Each of the 72 evacuation centres has generators as back up should there be a power failure, and mobile phone charging towers so that people can keep in touch with their loved ones.

Enough food supplies have been laid in to last a week.

Evacuees will be given a sleeping bag, a comforter and a flood kit with the basic essentials.

Kemaman keeps data on pregnant women in the area who are about to deliver and other critical medical cases so that the authorities can get them out and into the hospital if a flood becomes imminent.

The district has even set up a special base to take care of the needs of the armed forces and medical personnel (see sidebar) on

duty so that they can do their work with ease and have a place to rest before resuming their duties.

All this is the brainchild of Kemaman MP Datuk Seri Ahmad Shabery Cheek who is also the Agriculture and Agro-Based Industry Minister.

He won heaps of praise for the effort from Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak during the floods last year and more recently from deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Ahmad Zahid Hamidi who heads the National Disaster Management Committee.

Izmuddin says the key reason for Kemaman's success in this is because the various government agencies have taken the time to build a rapport with the villagers, the 121 village heads, and committees (Jawatankuasa Kemajuan dan Keselamatan Kampung, or JKKK) before hand.

"When we have our district or state activities, we invite the JKKK to come so that we can meet face-to-face and bond."

"The strength in Kemaman comes from the people and the

JKKK. Because even if our agencies are tip-top, without the JKKK, we would collapse."

"It is not about the MP, the agencies, the system or the machinery. We are talking about the people, their mindset and how to manage this during the floods."

"That is the first layer and we have to tackle that and get them on board."

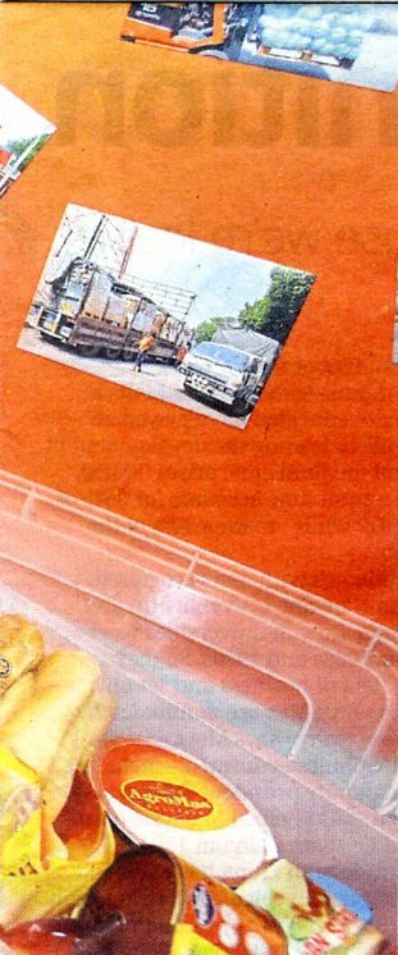
"Mind you, controlling the mindset and people's egos is not easy," he says.

He recalls that in 2013 many refused to leave their homes, including a pregnant woman who kept insisting that her house would not be flooded.

But it was and she phoned the district office asking for help to get her and her family out.

Asked if he or his officers get annoyed or tell people off in such situations, Izmuddin says the officers cannot afford to be emotional no matter how critical the situation.

"So we just follow our SOP and go and get them out. It was out of our control (when they didn't evac-



Clean water: Malissa Abd Solah, 33, a visitor at the Kemaman exhibition on flood preparations trying out the Blue Gold Atmospheric Water Generator.

uate earlier) and we can just hope nothing untoward happens as we rescue them," he says.

After the massive 2013 floods, he says, people have changed their mindsets about evacuation. Now they listen when told to leave.

This year, Kemaman has installed two webcams, one at Air Putih and the other at Kemasik, to monitor live the water levels, and if the levels start to rise, they sound the siren as a warning so that people can begin to evacuate.

They would know from leaflets and phone calls and information from their village head much earlier about which evacuation centre they are supposed to go to if it floods.

"We learnt our lesson in 2013 when we were caught by surprise by the magnitude of the floods.

"So now we have taught people how to manage the flood situation and not to panic because that will only cause chaos.

"Now, they evacuate in an orderly manner," he says.

Each of the 72 evacuation centres has a chairman, deputy, and secretary, a committee that handles registration as the evacuees come in, another committee that cooks the food, and another that takes care of the supplies.

"The reason we have seven days of food supply in the evacuation centre is because we want to focus our efforts on rescue missions so

we need not divide our time and effort with also getting in supplies."

The minute the water level starts to rise and the siren is sounded, the district officer (DO) will announce that it is starting to flood and the operations room will automatically swing into action.

That would be where all the coordination takes place.

The chairman of the evacuation centres would provide updates on the status and the well-being of the evacuees three times a day, on whether the numbers are rising, whether there is enough food, whether anyone has fallen sick.

And every night, there will be a coordination meeting at the command centre to plan what to do the next day and fix any problems that might arise.

He says in 2014, they got word that a group of rescuers who went in using a 4X4 couldn't get out again because the waters had risen.

In such a situation, he says, what they do first is to verify if the information is true, then they would feed it to the state because they need clearance to use a helicopter, which is a government asset.

Although they got the approval from the air force within half an hour, and there was a helipad where the rescue team was waiting, and the stranded party's coordinates had been pinpointed, Izmuiddin explains, there were other complications.

"It is a disaster situation not a normal rescue, so we need to take into account both the victims (the stranded team) and the rescuers (air force personnel), as both involve lives.

"The flight depends on weather conditions.

"Last year, we had to wait for four hours before we could rescue that stranded team because the rain was heavy and the wind was very strong and it was dangerous. We cannot endanger the lives of our rescuers to save other lives," he explains.

Technology and especially social media, he says, has its pros and cons during the floods.

He says when a boat with rescuers overturned and one of the victims was missing, a message went viral saying the person was safe in Kemaman Hospital.

"We postponed our mission to search for him and went to the hospital but he wasn't there so we had to go out again and look for him. Thank God he was safe.

"Technology can sometimes complicate things and we have to learn to manage it," he says.

Izmuiddin says when the flood waters recede to a safe level, people would hurry back to check on their houses.

"They will wash their houses or plan a gotong royong.

"They will not wait for the mud to dry. If their house is made of

wood, it would be dangerous to let the mud dry because it could 'eat' into the wood."

He says sometimes evacuation centres are opened and closed a number of times depending on the water level: "Our experience last year was that we opened and closed the evacuation centre nine times!"

When it is time to close the evacuation centre, it is the DO who would make the call and that information would be fed back to the state and Federal Governments.

After the floods, he says, the job to clean public facilities such as schools and places of worship would be handed over to the Youth and Sports Ministry which will coordinate volunteers and deploy assets like water jets, generators, water tankers, and lorries (see "Dealing with the aftermath" below).

Izmuiddin says officials from other states, including from Selangor and Perak, have come to Kemaman to see how they do it.

"We are happy to show them but we also tell them that what works for us might not work for them. They are welcome to follow what they feel can work for them."

"I always say a close relationship between the people and the administrators (of departments and government agencies) is crucial because if people don't go along with the plan, it will not work."