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Letter to Editor

7 September 2020

SINGLE FEDERAL AUTHORITY NEEDED TO PROTECT RIVERS

Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM) calls for the urgent establishment of a single, federal regulatory authority to seriously protect all rivers, as they are the nation's lifelines in the supply of water. Ninety-five per cent (95%) of our water needs come from our rivers.

We reiterate this call which has been made in the past, in view of the major water disruption in the Klang Valley these past few days, caused by pollution from factory sources.

As the Klang Valley water disruption incident has shown, about 1.2 million consumers were adversely affected, and damage was also caused to the economy of many businesses, who were unable to operate without water. The call for a single federal agency to protect our rivers has also been made several times before by Charles Santiago, the former chairman of the National Water Services Commission (SPAN), and SAM is in total agreement with him.

As is well known, currently there are too many agencies and authorities involved in the protection of rivers, and there is a lack of coordination between them, giving rise to the story of 'everybody, somebody, anybody and nobody' in performing the functions needed.

We agree that a single, federal authority is needed, whose sole duty should be to look after the country's rivers, including in ensuring that the water catchments which are in the states, are properly protected and the water resources are properly managed.

Piecemeal approaches, poor planning and lack of strong enforcement measures will not work anymore, as exemplified by the Klang Valley disaster and the Sungai Kim Kim tragedy in Johor, not to mention other river water pollution over the years.

The problem of climate change is going to cause further stress on our water resources, with more droughts and lack of rain.

This is compounded by the exploitation of our rivers for sand-mining and pollution, with the dumping of industrial and household wastes into them, as we continue to treat them as sewers, rather than as our water lifelines.

A further threat is the citing of hazardous and toxic waste facilities upstream of water intake points and along the rivers, with many businesses saving costs by simply dumping their waste into rivers.

With a lack of proper continuous monitoring and enforcement, our rivers and water sources are in constant threat of high levels of water contamination, rendering poor quality water unfit for human consumption.

Unsuspecting and innocent water users are at risk from ill-health and ailments stemming from consuming rubbish, sewage, plastics, chemicals and heavy metals.

We agree with Santiago that rivers should be treated as a national security area with buffers of around 200 metres on both sides where possible. They must be monitored with updated technology, CCTVs and sensors that prevent encroachments into these zones.

Unless we have a federal regulatory body which is independent and answerable to Parliament, the Klang Valley water disruption disaster would be repeated, not just in Selangor but in other states as well. It is time to stop politicking between the federal government and the states, as well as the turf wars among the many agencies involved, and take action before another disaster happens.

In the meanwhile, the efforts must be expedited to enact the changes to the current Environment Quality Act 1974 so that it has more force and bite to deter polluters from treating the rivers as dumping grounds for their wastes.

We must learn from the grave lessons and not take our water resources for granted, as water is a basic need for all life.

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