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**Letter to Editor of The Star**

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### **Need to halt reliance on coal for energy in the interest of climate**

Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM) refers to Mangai Balasegaram's article entitled '*Malaysia needs to stop building coal-fired power plants – here's why*' published in *The Star* (of 11th August), and wish to express our whole-hearted support on her call.

In the interest of climate change, we urge the Malaysian government to halt the country's reliance on coal for our energy source, and expedite efforts urgently to reform the energy sector towards renewable energy (RE) that departs from dependence on fossil fuels.

Attempts at reforming Malaysia's energy sector through a series of policies and interventions since the 1980s were mainly targeted to preserve the national energy security, above all else. It was only in 2000, when the Fifth Fuel Diversification Policy (FFDP) was rolled out, that RE such as biomass, biogas, solar and mini hydro as a source of energy (collectively identified as the 'fifth fuel') was first introduced. It has been 20 years since the FFDP and Malaysia continues to burn more coal than ever today, contributing to the climate change problem caused by carbon dioxide emissions (CO<sub>2</sub>).

Although Malaysia aims to achieve 20% RE penetration by 2025, it is currently at a meagre 2% (mainly from solar photovoltaic). Therefore, there is no comfort to be taken by just electrifying sectors such as transportation, and labelling them with the magical word 'eco' when the source of fuel to generate this very electricity still comes from dirty fossil fuels.

### ***No more time for coal***

As much as 38% of global electricity generation continues to rely on coal, while the national figure is even higher, where coal makes up half (50.6%) of the fuels burned to generate electricity in 2017. Shockingly, just 20 years before in 1997, coal only contributed a meagre 7.4% as a source of electric power (while natural gas dominated at 63.4%).

Globally, the burning of coal is responsible for 46% of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and accounts for an astounding 72% of the total greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions from the electricity sector alone.

As is well-known by now, we are facing a climate emergency and there is enough warning that all countries must do their utmost in ensuring that the planet's average surface temperature does not exceed 1.5°C compared with pre-industrial levels, and we are already at 1°C at present.

Relying on coal when there are viable and affordable RE alternatives is irresponsible.

Generating electricity from coal is inefficient even with its improvements. As Mangai points out, what Malaysia needs today are energy sources with flexibility, not *'big dinosaur plants'*.

### ***Need to avoid carbon lock-in***

Currently, Malaysia imports as much as 98% of its coal that is burned in thermal power plants to generate about 40% of the country's electricity. In 2018, the country was the 8th largest importer in the world for coal briquettes and the 12th largest importer of bituminous coal (not agglomerated), spending as much as USD3.59 billion and USD1.78 billion, respectively. Coal is mainly imported from Indonesia, Australia and Russia.

Although RE can effectively compete with oil and gas in general, the existing coal-fired thermal plants continue to operate as usual because coal is a cheap source of fuel for electricity generation. However, burning coal comes with a range of externalities (e.g. negative costs to the environment and public health) which are not fully acknowledged, let alone internalised in the pricing of electricity.

If the government fails to seriously rethink the energy choices made today, it will lock the country onto a higher carbon emissions trajectory for years to come with its reliance on fossil fuels, including coal. This is inconsistent with its obligations under the Paris Agreement, where countries are expected to strive towards long-term low-emissions strategies.

Such carbon lock-in irresponsibly exposes the nation and its people to the grave risks in the future from the adverse impacts of climate change which can bring untold suffering.

Like any other country in the world, Malaysia has a duty to safeguard its' energy security. However, securing such energy security cannot be at the expense of climate risks, especially when safer alternatives such as RE exist.

In view of this, we urge the government to halt further coal-fired power plants and not proceed to embark on short-sighted, carbon- intensive development that fails to lay the critical groundwork needed to ensure climate resilience and prevent a carbon lock-in.

**Meenakshi Raman**  
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