



Persatuan Pengguna Pulau Pinang Consumers Association of Penang

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Letter to Editor

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Government authorities must take responsibility for latest landslide tragedy; Work on all hill-related projects should stop until proper checks are carried out

The Consumers Association of Penang (CAP) is most alarmed and outraged by yet another landslide tragedy in Paya Terubong, Penang that has already claimed the at least 6 lives, with many more workers believed to be buried under the earth.

In relation to current hill-related construction projects, we call on the Penang State government to halt all of them until proper safety and environmental checks are carried out to ascertain all precautionary measures have been taken, to avoid further tragedies.

The Bukit Kukus incident is a tragedy for the victims who died and were injured and their families, as well as another warning that people residing in the areas where hill development is taking place are not living in safe conditions.

It is shocking that no construction site in Penang is following the soil erosion mitigation plan stipulated in their project approvals, according to a report in an English newspaper.

It is also shocking that this Paya Terubong paired highway road project along Bukit Kukus is a project of the Majlis Bandaraya Pulau Pinang (MBPP), as revealed by Penang's Chief Minister, Chow Kon Yeow at a press conference yesterday. This shows the government is unable to ensure the safety of its own projects.

Despite a stop work order having been issued by the Department of Occupational Health and Safety (DOSH) a few days ago in relation to a collapse of beams along the road project, it clearly shows that no safety and preventive measures were taken at the site to protect workers and prevent any mishaps.

A visit to the site of the landslide by CAP yesterday clearly showed massive clearings and barren steep slopes as steep along the project site as almost 90 degrees. There was absolutely no slope protection or soil stabilisation measures to be seen at the site, which is a clear invitation for disasters to happen.

The Penang State and local government authorities cannot claim this to be an 'act of God' due to the rains as one does not need to be an expert to know that if you leave steep slopes barren with no protection or stabilisation measures, it is bound to lead to landslides.

Clearly, the government authorities have not learnt from all the recent landslide tragedies, including the landslide tragedy that killed 11 persons in the Tanjung Bunga area just one year ago.

The Penang State and the MBPP must accept blame and responsibility for their lack of oversight, lack of strict monitoring and lack of enforcement measures, leading to this tragedy, in what is the government's own project.

Moreover, the MBPP has a geotechnical unit, with experts who are supposed to review all hillslope projects and ensure proper measures are in place. It is supposed to be overseen by a State Level Risky Land Development Committee for high risk projects, as set out in the Penang Hillside Development Guidelines 2012.

The guidelines require proper monitoring and enforcement by the relevant authorities, including the MBPP, for all hill-related projects, including of course the government's own projects like the one in Bukit Kukus.

Yet this latest tragedy has happened, so soon after the Tanjung Bunga landslide a year ago, and after the collapse of the beams in Bukit Kukus just a few days ago.

What this reveals is that the State and the MBPP have absolutely no capability in ensuring that hillslope projects including road projects such as this, are capable of being undertaken in a safe manner.

All the assurances given previously by various state and municipal authorities and representatives of state government and its parties are now exposed as being misleading.

CAP calls for the following measures to be taken by the Penang State Government and the MBPP:

- Immediate action has to be taken to take remedial action on the Bukit Kukus highway to prevent further landslides and slope failures.
- Given the lack of monitoring and enforcement capability on the part of the State authorities and the local government, it is time for the Penang Government to halt all further approvals of projects involving hill lands and slopes, even for government projects, including those under the Penang Transport Master Plan.
- Given the frequency of landslides and the report that construction sites in Penang are not following the required soil erosion mitigation plan, the state government should stop work on all existing projects on hill sites until checks are carried out that ascertain the works are being undertaken safely. The authorities should carry out immediate inspections at the construction sites and take action to ensure measures are in place to prevent slope failures and landslides before resumption of works. Given the lack of capacity of the state and municipal authorities, assistance should be sought from the federal government and other states to undertake inspection and monitoring and enforcement measures.
- The State should put its energy and allocate funds to correct all the mal-development at hillslopes and hills that have taken place in recent years. Penang Hill alone has almost 200 landslides, many of which have not yet been repaired. The state should not use an excuse of lack of funds, but instead change its priorities so that funds are provided for essentials, including protecting hill areas and monitoring hill site developments.
- The state and municipal authorities should take responsibility for the PayaTerubong tragedy and hold key officials accountable and responsible. In other countries, the main officials of responsible agencies would resign while accepting blame for their inactions.
- The Penang Transport Master Plan and its projects should not proceed, given the massive over-development they will involve, and the lack of capacity of the authorities to oversee and monitor their implementation.
- The families of the victims of the landslide must be properly compensated, and the process and amounts of compensation should be made transparent to ensure that their welfare is taken care of.

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