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Press Release

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Learning the lessons from unexpected weather events

Malaysia is usually prepared for the seasonal flood occurrences on the East Coast with the normal monsoons this time of the year. However, what was rather unexpected was the massive floods that hit especially the Klang Valley most seriously this time around, due to the phenomena such as the Tropical Depression in the region and the effects of super-typhoon Rai that hit the Philippines.

It is true that rainfalls were unusually high in parts of the country, but what this shows is that we must prepare for such unexpected events, which are likely to happen more often with greater frequency due to the adverse impacts of climate change.

World over, unexpected extreme weather events have become more commonplace, and concerns have arisen on the need to focus on adaptation and in building climate resilience, as well as in improving our efforts at disaster preparedness.

We cannot anymore treat such rainfall intensities as one-off seasonal events, but we must plan for them and take all measures needed to minimise the impacts from such events.

Regrettably, we are not moving fast enough despite having plans since the 11th Malaysia Plan (2016-2020) on reducing disaster risks through augmenting climate change adaptation and strengthening disaster risk management.

The nation has just recently embarked on putting in place a National Adaptation Plan (NAP) to guide legislation, governance, planning and coordination of adaptation measures as well as an adaptation index to measure vulnerability levels of the country against climate change impacts.

But this effort requires more urgency, as the reality on the ground shows the country is not moving in the right direction, with business-as-usual development projects and plans, as we are not planning or preparing adequately or at all for the current and impending climate impacts.

Many questions arise in this regard. Are our policy-makers and planners at all levels of government, including the architects and engineers sufficiently aware of the current and impending impacts of climate change? Are we planning for future threats and disasters?

We see the promotion of massive 'business-as-usual' infrastructure projects of highways, tunnels, reclamation works and building construction, with little or no regard for climate change risks and impacts. There does not seem to be enough consideration given to whether such projects contribute to increasing climate resilience or if they undermine them.

We have to sound the alarm bells even louder and adapt (if possible) to the 'new-normal' of climate change

impacts. We have to also be ready to face situations where adaptation is no longer possible.

The time to invest in adaptation plans and measures that build the country's climate resilience is long overdue. Urgent responses are needed now and we can learn from what other countries are already doing.

There are also international funds available to us, such as the UNFCCC's Green Climate Fund that has resources to help countries cope with the climate challenge.

Clearly, there has to be a reset button in the way we do things to secure our futures, in a climate-changing world. We have to begin to relook at everything we do from a climate change lens. For otherwise, we will be making wrong investments that will not be sustainable in the long-run, and which would be a colossal waste of scarce public resources.

Urgent adaptation plans that include ecosystem-based approaches are needed to ensure buildings, infrastructure and coastal areas are resilient to storms, increased rain, withstand floods and sea-level rise, etc. Forest and soil conservation measures, including the protection of watersheds and rivers to prevent and mitigate against floods, turning urban areas into "sponge cities", and the strengthening of our coastlines through mangrove forest protection and rehabilitation are all vital parts of the plan. More comprehensive measures are also needed in dealing with droughts, heatwaves, water shortages, impacts on agriculture, health, extreme weather and disasters.

Clearly, a lot more needs to be done, and with extreme urgency. For otherwise, we may be totally unprepared for future disasters, with catastrophic consequences, as we have seen from the most recent floods these past few days.

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