

Nobody listens to the Voice of Reason

Is it so hard to remember that man's faculty of reasoning is what separates man from the animal kingdom?

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LandMatters

By Salleh Buang

“Leave the hills alone”, warned the Voice.

“What? Can't hear you,” came the instant reply.

Just eight words, but they succinctly sum up what has been happening to our hillslopes and highlands all these years.

The “Voice” here is the voice of reason. I am sure every right-thinking Malaysian can understand my meaning.

After all, what separates man from the animal kingdom is that man has been given the faculty of reasoning while the latter is merely given the instinct of self-survival.

While the message and the warning given by the Voice is crystal clear, the party at the receiving end is apparently incapable of hearing and heeding it.

Or it could be just being too stubborn or uncaring to listen.

I was in the Klang Valley when the latest tragedy in Bukit Antarabangsa in Ampang, Kuala Lumpur, made early morning prime news last Saturday. I woke

Land Conservation Act 1960 and does not that law prohibit any development from being carried out on “hill land”.

The answer is that while the law is clear, most state authorities still do not bother to gazette their hill land under the Act. When such land has not been gazetted as hill land, it is not protected from the grasp of developers.

To aggravate the problem, there are also cases where gazetted hill land has been degazetted, as happened in Paya Terubung, Penang, in the notorious case of Richvale (M) Sdn Bhd v Majlis Perbandaran Pulau Pinang (Rayuan No. LR/PP/1/93).

I am told that a study had been carried out some time ago by a research unit under the Works Ministry, after which the Paya Terubong-Balik Pulau hillside had been identified as “a landslide prone area” and therefore unsuitable for highrise development. Despite the finding, the Paya Terubong area was given the greenlight for



The Dec 6 landslide in Bukit Antarabangsa in Ampang, KL, killed four people, destroyed many homes, while over 3,000 residents had to be evacuated.

news last Saturday. I woke up as usual around 6.40am in my hotel room to perform my morning prayers and had just sat down to sip my hot coffee when the horrible news struck me like a clap of thunder. My immediate reaction was to cry out in near despair "Oh no. Not again".

The four deaths this time are less than the 48 in the Highland Towers tragedy 15 years ago. Whether four or 48, each death is still a loss to the grieving families and relatives.

Years ago when these hillside development projects were still on the drawing board, if the relevant state authority had not buckled under the never-satisfied demands of the developers, there would not be people living in homes built on hill-slopes in the area.

When such tragedies occur, I am frequently asked what has happened to the

given the greenlight for such development.

As my colleague, columnist and local government expert Dr Goh Ban Lee, and I watched the television screen in our hotel room bringing up hourly updates on the recent Bukit Antarabangsa tragedy, the questions that went through my mind were "Where are the former government leaders who approved these hillside projects and where are the chief executive officers of the housing development companies which undertook them?"

We saw the Sultan of Selangor, the prime minister, the deputy prime minister, the current menteri besar and some exco members. But the people who should be there to take the responsibility and face the affected residents were not. They apparently chose to stay in the shadows, their

identities safe from public scrutiny.

Dr Goh told me if such incident were to happen in the West, within a couple of hours the whole nation would be shown on prime time television the faces of those responsible for approving the project and the CEOs of the companies which built those homes and thereafter left the surrounding terrain in a hazardous condition. They would be grilled by the media.

Touring the stricken area and looking visibly distraught by the multiple deaths, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said "Enough is enough" and urged all state governments to stop all housing projects on high risk hillsides in the future.

Whether his words would be heeded or ignored by the state governments is

an open question. Only time will tell.

Urging developers not to lobby the government for approval, Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak said the government would no longer issue development orders or planning permission for new hillside developments.

That is, of course, the Voice again. Wonder what will be the reply this time. A couple of years down the line, will we see more landslides and more deaths, to be followed by the Voice again?

Lest we forget, from 1990 to 2006, at least 13 landslides occurred in the Klang Valley alone – six in Hulu Kelang, two in Setapak, two in Puchong and one each in Cheras, Balakong and Bukit Tunku.

The worst occurred on Dec 11, 1993 when 48 lives were lost in the Highland Towers tragedy. That was

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followed on Nov 20, 2002 when eight lives were lost and a two-storey bungalow completely destroyed in another landslide. On Oct 31, 2006, four people died in the Zoo View-Kampung Pasir landslide.

In December 1993, after the Highland Towers tragedy, we said "Never again". But as the preceding paragraph shows, it happened again

and again.

When will it ever end?
Does anyone really listen to the Voice?

Salleh Buang is senior advisor of a company specialising in competitive intelligence. He is also active in training and public speaking and can be reached at sallehbuang@hotmail.com