

Let's learn to look beyond the horizon

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ENVIRONMENT: What are we doing apart from complaining about the haze and global warming?

MOST of us are like the famous, or rather, infamous, boiling frog. Remember the story about how if you place a frog in a container of water and then proceed to heat the water gradually, the frog will not notice the heat building up until it is too late?

In the story, you end up getting fresh frog stew. In reality, scientists say, the frog will be able to feel the heat in time to leap out of the container. That's another story.

But the frog story does throw light on our predisposition to not notice, or care enough, if something happens in increments. It could be global warming, or hills being cut down for physical development, or laws enacted to remove more freedoms. The effect has to be immediate, or impactful,



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Have we punished those Malaysian entrepreneurs found involved in such forest burning? Is anyone boycotting the firms involved?

We talk so much about global warming, but how many of us are acting on it? How many of us have changed to compact fluorescent bulbs to save electricity, or reduced meat intake so that forests are not cut down for livestock grazing, or drive between 45kph and 80kph to conserve fuel?

How many people pressure their governments to implement laws or policies that ease climate change?

Did you know that a major contributor to the demise of the Indus Valley Civilisation was climate change?

The civilisation that developed about 5,200 years ago stretched for about one million square



for us to sit up.

Even if we do notice, we don't always act. And when we do act, it is cautious; unless of course we are the aggrieved party. Often, if it goes on for some time, we slip into a reluctant acceptance of it.

We complain and carp and even pule about rising prices, increasing crime, the education system and a myriad other things. It is, after all, our favourite pastime (what do you think I'm doing here?).

Most of us, for instance, have accepted that the haze is an annual affair and have learned to live with it. As a colleague quipped: "Whether the Indonesian maids come or not, the haze from Indonesia comes regularly, and no visa is required."

But why should we accept a situation which adversely affects our health?

Every year, usually around June or July, we complain about the haze — caused mainly by land clearing in Indonesia — and the government issues placatory statements.

But nobody has the will to bell the cat? Why isn't our government, or Asean, acting effectively to get Indonesia to stop or control the fires caused by land-clearing activities there?

Have we citizens protested loudly enough for our MPs and the government to see the urgency of resolving this poisonous problem?

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kilometres across an area that is now divided between India, Pakistan, Nepal and Bangladesh. Climate change resulted in the people abandoning its cities and migrating elsewhere between 3,000 and 3,900 years ago.

Late last month, the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution in Massachusetts, the United States, said: "A new study combining the latest archaeological evidence and state-of-the-art geoscience technologies" showed that "climate change was a key ingredient in the collapse" of the Indus civilisation. The study was undertaken by a team of international scientists, headed by a scientist from Woods Hole.

What do you think happened to the people of Angkor Wat? Sudden and intense variations in climate resulted in their disappearance.

You may say "Yes uh?", but "Yes uh?" won't help us. We need to learn from this, we need to see beyond the horizon.

In Malaysia, hills have been mercilessly decapitated for about three decades now. Most of us have become inured of it, which is why developers, with the connivance of some officials in local authorities or positions of power, continue to destroy them in their hunger for larger and larger profits.

Developers, and officials, have learned the trick: when some members of the public raise a cry, they lie low; sometimes administrators

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take token action against the perpetrators. When people get distracted by something else, the developers continue where they left off.

Recently, Parliament passed the Evidence (Amendment) (No. 2) Act. The usual group of non-governmental organisations and individuals are protesting for they fear it is open to abuse as the person charged would have to prove he is innocent, thus reversing the universally accepted concept that one is innocent until proven guilty. Want to bet this will soon be forgotten?

If any law, or power, can be abused, it will be — if not now, tomorrow; if not by me, by someone else, perhaps someone after me.

We do not just suffer from procrastination; we do not just suffer from indifference; we suffer from intellectual myopia, an inability to

see the long-term ramifications of acts or events taking place; and we suffer from inertia. The good news, however, is that some are waking up from this submissive stupor.


But it's not just Malaysians who are afflicted. The nations that gathered in Brazil from June 20 to 22 for the UN conference on sustainable development agreed on this: "We recognise that the 20 years since the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in 1992 have seen uneven progress, including in sustainable development and poverty eradication. We emphasise the need to make progress in implementing previous commitments."

True, there has been some progress. But that is due to the scientists with data and policymakers with schemata who can see clearly and act forcefully, not the rest of us who can't see beyond the horizon.

Will we become the boiling frog in the story? Or will we act as would a real frog placed in a situation where the heat slowly simmers to a boil?

I am optimistic that we will make the leap, for humans are survivors. And given the reach of the Internet today, we should learn a little quicker. But let's make the leap soon, shall we?

"Genius is that which forces the inertia of humanity to learn." — **Henri Bergson**

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