



Urgency missing in flood mitigation efforts

Here we go again. Flash floods struck the federal capital on April 25 again, and the public is getting fed up. There was major flooding in March too, and probably the worst flooding the country has faced happened last December.

The public is losing hope in the government and government agencies. Increasingly, people are doubting the capability of political leaders and civil servants tasked with handling natural disasters such as floods. I am one of them.

And we only have to see the unfavourable comments by netizens to know their perception of the effectiveness of the National Disaster Management Agency or Nadma.

One hour of rain is enough for flash floods to damage properties and play havoc with the lives of Malaysians in some areas.

Apart from causing human suffering, even death at times, floods do considerable damage to homes, vehicles and public assets such as health and education facilities. The poor become even poorer as a result.

The authorities have yet to learn from the December 2021 floods across eight states which caused at least 54 deaths and affected an estimated 125,000 people. Sure, the government announced on Dec 29 that it would provide RM1.4 billion in cash aid and other forms of relief to those affected by the floods but how long will this go on?

We can't be giving out money each time floods occur.

Many of us share the blame for the floods. It includes those who continue to throw unwanted stuff into drains and rivers. It also includes those who, in chasing profits, clear land of trees for "development" or are complicit in overlogging and other activities that damage the ecosystem.

Sometimes I wonder if the comparatively invisible and apparently transient nature of losses is the reason for the lack of urgency among government leaders and many members of the public. Perhaps we have simply become too inured to the regular floods.

The problem now is that we are no longer dealing with regular, monsoonal floods. We are seeing flash floods in various parts of the country even when it's not the monsoon season. Who would have expected the federal capital, for instance, to be deluged by flood waters so frequently? Who would have expected major roads to become rivers of water?

You would expect the national capital to have the best drainage system and regular clearing of rivers to ensure smooth water flow, thus reducing the incidence of floods. But that's not the case.

Following the floods last December, the **Department of Statistics** estimated that damage to public assets and infrastructure caused losses of RM2 billion while damage to homes resulted in RM1.6 billion in losses. Overall, it said, the floods caused an estimated RM6.1 billion in losses.

And let's not forget the more important fact which is the loss of life, injuries and the pain and suffering flood victims have to undergo. You can't put a monetary value on it.

It's not that the government and top civil servants are unaware of climate change and its ramifications, such as the increasing frequency of floods. In fact, climate change mitigation features prominently in the 12th Malaysia Plan passed by Parliament last Oct 7. The government plans for Malaysia to be carbon neutral by 2050, and to revamp areas such as land use, energy and transportation to achieve this.

But I doubt if the present bunch of leaders and civil servants responsible for this will be able to achieve it. I think the plan will largely remain a plan, based on the history of our authorities' achievements and the speed of action in handling environmental and even other issues such as deaths in custody.

I mean, we have been drowning in floods for decades but despite all the action plans devised and pledges made and money allocated, floods continue unabated. In fact, instances of flooding have increased. Obviously, those responsible for flood prevention and alleviation – including local councils and town planners – have failed big time.

I'm flummoxed by the low priority given to tackling floods when it's clear that of all the natural disasters that occur in the country, floods cause the most damage. More so when the frequency and extremity of the floods keep increasing every year.

The Asian Development Bank, in a report last year, said the frequency and extremity of flood events had increased in recent decades in Malaysia and that projections showed they would continue to rise with continued global warming.

I am even more worried now because I just finished reading predictions by the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR).

Its global assessment report, released on April 26, estimates that by 2030, the world can expect to witness 560 disaster events a year, or 1.5 disasters a day.

A few days earlier, the UNDRR, in a report titled "2020: The Non-Covid Year in Disasters", noted that while world attention was focused on the Covid-19 pandemic, an increasing number of climate-related disasters posed challenges for disaster management agencies.

It said more than 90% of 389 recorded disaster events in 2020 were climate related and that the year saw steep rises in floods and storms compared with the annual average over the last 20 years.

These non-Covid-19 events resulted in 15,080 deaths, with 98.4 million people being affected. Economic losses were estimated to be at least US\$171.3 billion.

In 2020, there were 201 major recorded floods, 23% more than the annual average of 163 and they resulted in 6,171 deaths, 18% more than the annual average of 5,233 deaths, the report said.

Now, according to the UN's global assessment report, between 350 and 500 medium- to large-scale disasters took place every year over the past two decades. The scale and intensity of disasters are increasing, with more people being killed or affected in the last five years than in the previous five, it says.

Disasters, it notes, disproportionately impact developing countries, which lose an average of 1% of GDP a year to disasters, compared with 0.1-0.3% in developed countries. The highest cost is borne by the Asia-Pacific region, which loses an average 1.6% of GDP to disasters every year.

Mami Mizutori, special representative of the Secretary-General for Disaster Risk Reduction of the UNDRR says: “Disasters can be prevented, but only if countries invest the time and resources to understand and reduce their risks.”

The question is whether Malaysia is able and willing to “invest time and resources to understand and reduce” the risks of climate change, and thereby also reduce incidences of flooding.

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