

## KERATAN AKHBAR



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# Our water security needs to be better

WATER is a precious commodity. It can disrupt everyday living – we see evidence of this whenever there is a water shortage.

Water can stop industry if there is not enough of it. Without sufficient water, agriculture will come to a standstill, because all crops are dependent on a good supply of water. Here, the oil palm is a water guzzler. Producing rice is also difficult without sufficient water.

This is the reason why every country in the world strives for better water security. As a nation, are we doing enough to secure our water? Admittedly, we are among the more fortunate of nations since every year we receive plenty of water through the monsoons. The question is, how much of the rain-water deluge is effectively captured for use?

Some predict water will replace oil as the main source of conflict in the world. We already hear of trouble brewing among the countries dependent on the Nile River for water. Ethiopia is building a massive dam to tap hydro energy.

Egypt and Sudan are already voicing concern that the water they desperately need to feed their agriculture may soon be reduced to a trickle by the dam.

The Nile is not alone. Closer to home, the Mekong is another river



Photo: YAP CHEE HONG/The Star

that feeds many countries as it meanders towards the sea. We already hear of countries upstream contemplating similar hydro-power projects like Ethiopia.

Fortunately, we are not dependent on any of the major tributaries of the world. But we can get embroiled in other forms of conflict if we do not manage our water well.

The Academy of Sciences Malaysia has been hosting a very active group of fellows studying the nation's water situation. Many reports have been submitted to the government over the years on concerns ranging from water resource

management, the water supply and demand situation, and water R&D, just to name a few. Some of the recommendations have been taken up and incorporated in the nation's water policy.

However, many of the group members have expressed concern over the poor execution of policy. One issue that is raised constantly relates to the issue of integrated water resources management, or IWRM. The feeling is that we are still behind in implementing this. Unless serious action is taken to execute the recommendations outlined under IWRM, the nation may one day find that water shortages

are an even more common occurrence than they are now.

Essentially, IWRM is about securing the supply source, reducing wastage and efficiently managing demand. Water experts are concerned that supply continues to be threatened by increasing disturbance to water catchment areas. Uncontrolled illegal logging is mostly to blame but there are also situations where farming has encroached into sensitive catchment areas.

Water wastage occurs mainly through the pollution of water-courses and rivers. This arises from discharges from industries and runoff from agricultural lands. Lately, the indiscriminate disposal of toxic factory wastes has become a serious concern. Wastage also occurs through the water distribution system through leakages and even thefts.

Efficiently managing demand is also one way to reduce wastage. This is where our high per capita water usage is a concern. It has been reported that we now consume on average about 200 litres per person per day, which is way above the recommended level of 50 litres to 100 litres per person per day stipulated by the World Health Organisation.

The low price we pay for water

is one reason why per capita consumption is so high. The price of water can be politically sensitive, so there is a general reluctance by the authorities to raise water rates. Unlike in the developed economies, like in Australia where farmers are charged for their water usage, agriculture activity here gets water almost free. This cannot be sustainable since the cost of supplying water is on the rise.

To ensure water security in the country, we need to rethink our water policy. And since water is a crucial commodity in socio-economic growth, the government's Shared Prosperity Vision 2030 will have to take into account the many issues surrounding water.

A discourse between the industry, academia and government can help develop ideas to resolve the issues. For this reason, several universities, the industry and a few international partners plan to host a forum in March 2020 to discuss water issues with a view to sparking meaningful collaboration between industry, academia and government.

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