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One-stop centre for slope development

IN the aftermath of the recent Cameron Highlands landslides, many authorities responsible for slope management and safety have been going through a hand-wringing and soul-searching process on the cause and impact of the disaster that claimed five lives.

This is the second time a similar event of this nature has occurred in recent years. One of the questions we must ask ourselves is, are we learning any lessons from this at all? What are we going to do to prevent a similar incident like this from happening again in the future?

possible to ensure that such an incident of this scale would not happen again.

The state and local government learned from their past mistakes and reengineered its development approval, maintenance and mitigation processes towards safer slopes.

For their part, the residents took control over the role of monitoring, reporting, and simple maintenance of the slopes around them. While there are no guarantees of absolute certainty given the vagaries of extreme rainfall and other factors inherent in hillside areas, a system has been set in place to do whatever is humanly possible to mitigate against landslide occurrences.

Making a mistake is human and if we learn from it, it serves to improve collectively as a society. But if we continue to repeat them, perhaps it's time to review and overhaul the system.

SlopeWatch would thus like to share some suggestions towards this end.

First, use forensic reports to make improvements towards preventing the same thing from happening again. The idea of openly using lessons learned from disasters was discussed during the development of the Public Works Department's Slope Master Plan several years ago. One of its advisers, Dr David Petley, a landslide expert in the UK pointed out that a culture of no finger-pointing and blaming in the airline industry enabled the various players in the aeronautical sector to openly discuss and improve on processes, procedures, and designs that enabled a culture of continuous improvement. Likewise, he suggested that such a culture be emulated for the slope management sector in Malaysia.

Similarly, in Hong Kong, former director Dr Andrew Malone states that the Geotechnical Engineering Office (GEO) is required to publish its forensic landslide reports for public use and for the purpose of improving its slope safety system. In fact, 19 years ago the Hong Kong government set up an independent review board of international geotechnical experts to oversee all aspects of GEO's work, including its forensic investigations of landslides.

While there are sensitive issues to be considered in terms of legal repercussions, the benefits of using forensic reports for the purpose of disclosure in the interest of societal improvement should be explored.

Several recommendations for better slope management within the country were

drafted as resolutions at a seminar hosted by the Construction Industry Development Board and Housing Ministry earlier this year.

Addressing shortfalls in the current slope management system, these recommendations were proposed by stakeholders in the Federal, state, local government, legal, community, NGOs and industry sectors.

One of the recommendations which is relevant in the case of Cameron Highlands is to set up a one-stop centre within each state to approve new developments on slopes.

This recommendation calls for a clearing house of all slope developments which enables a more thorough geotechnical evaluation of new projects, be they residential, commercial or agricultural.

While Selangor, Wilayah Persekutuan and Penang already have their centres, other states have yet to do so. Such centres should be set up throughout the country, beginning with those with sensitive hillside and highland areas.

Of course, it is difficult to approve developments if they are illegal. For this reason, monitoring and reporting is very important. There must be a system put in place for monitoring and reporting on any illegal clearing activities in hillside areas.

In this case, it does not only involve residents, as usually promulgated by SlopeWatch, but must also actively involve the authorities and other slope managers in coming up with ever effective ways of monitoring illicit activities.

The importance of adherence to slope guidelines cannot be understated. Until recently, agriculture land was exempted from slope guidelines, but last year, the Agriculture Ministry had imposed guidelines on farming on slopes.

While guidelines are not as legally binding as laws, they can serve as powerful tools for adherence by making them part of the approval criteria requirements as practised by local authorities in the one-stop centres.

The time to break the cycle of deadly landslides in Cameron Highlands is now. Only by making sweeping systematic changes and demonstrating a willingness to take action can we give meaning to the tragic deaths of those who had perished in the recent incident.

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