

## Lessons from the past

Professor Tan Sri Dato' Dzul kifli Abd Razak

Comment

[New Sunday Times - 06/13/2010](#)

WORLD Environment Day, which is celebrated every June 5, took the theme Biodiversity -- Ecosystems Management and the Green Economy this year.

The day has been dubbed "the main weapon of the United Nations" to make people aware of worldwide environmental destruction and draw the attention and action of various political sources.

This year there is no lack of attention grabbers although we cannot say the same for the effectiveness of the efforts taken so far.

One of the incidents which comes to mind is the Bhopal, India, gas leak in 1984 which finally saw seven former Union Carbide local officials convicted of having caused "death by negligence" last week.

They reportedly failed to prevent the leak at the pesticide plant that killed thousands and maimed many more. It took the court about 25 years to pass the judgement -- a light sentence of two years in prison and a fine of 10,000 rupees each (though maximum under the charges) subject to appeal. The company prefers to think that the gas leak was due to "sabotage".

Still, this is just an all-Indian affair since the prosecution failed to get the top officials of the Union Carbide parent group, including its former chairperson (a foreigner) to stand trial in India. The Bhopal court declared him an "absconder" now safely in the United States, after requests for his extradition since 1993 was refused.

Union Carbide, however, says all liabilities related to the incident were settled in 1989 with a payment of US\$470 million (RM1.5 billion) to India's government. This amount does not reflect the gravity of the incident where an estimated 100,000 people continue to suffer till today.

As one Bhopal activist says, "there's nothing to be happy about when it comes to this tragedy - allegedly the worst in India's history."

No less prominent in the news is British Petroleum's handling of the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. A company known for its Beyond Petroleum (BP) vision is now labelled the Best Polluter given that the disaster is America's worst.

Reportedly, "a string of failures" occurred in handling the crisis since the April 20 rig explosion triggered the incident.

This is expected to continue until August at least, despite the claim of progress. Estimates put the leak at 12,000 to 19,000 barrels a day.

BP is looking at billions of dollars in penalties, which according to some, exceed the money earned in selling the recouped oil. The Deepwater Horizon oil platform explosion killed 11 workers and created a stranglehold on environment, especially fisheries and other wildlife in the entire Gulf.

Indeed, the severity of the situation will most likely cost US President Barack Obama what Hurricane Katrina cost former US President George W. Bush! After all, a few days before the tragedy Obama claimed that "oil rigs today generally don't cause spills".

Closer to home, the news that made headlines is the cost for the proposed nuclear plant -- roughly estimated at between US\$2.5 billion and US\$4 billion, depending on the plant's size and features.

When speaking in Parliament last week, Energy, Green Technology and Water Minister Datuk Seri Peter Chin Fah Ku admitted that the start-up cost is high but highlighted the lower operating costs relative to the use of oil, gas and coal (solar energy was not mentioned).

And the setting up of the nuclear plant may be as early as 2021. Chin gave the assurance that current technology employed "did not allow the possibility of such (nuclear) incidents from happening again".

The year 2021 is at least a decade away and advances in solar technology is expected. Given that we have sunlight throughout the year, coupled with the right investment in and incentives for solar research and innovation, Malaysia could be better placed in developing what it has in abundance.

In Yale's Environmental Performance Index 2010, Malaysia ranked 54th among 153 nations with a score of 65, after Singapore, which, at 28th spot with a score of 69, is top in the region. While this is quite encouraging,

how we fare in the future depends on what we plan to do now.

And this is where incidents such as that of Bhopal or the Chernobyl nuclear power plant explosion in 1986 must be foremost in our minds.

Hopefully, 2021 will be Malaysia's first anniversary as a developed nation, and it will be proud of its management of its ecosystems and biodiversity then.

\* The writer is the Vice-Chancellor of Universiti Sains Malaysia. He can be contacted at [vc@usm.my](mailto:vc@usm.my)

[Terms & Conditions](#)