

Water is life, guard it well

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Comment

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HANOI, judging by the traffic, especially the millions of motorbikes that clog the streets, is a city in a hurry.

So, too, the number of construction projects being undertaken. Of particular significance is the new Phu Quoc International Airport which had its ground-breaking ceremony last week. Scheduled to be completed in mid-2012, it will be a breakthrough not only for Phu Quoc Island, referred to as the "untapped pearl" (watch out Penang!) but also for the country.

Already, most apparent is the rate at which businesses are being conducted just about anywhere, even on five-foot ways and public spaces.

The director of the Department of Small and Medium Enterprises noted that in the first eight months of the year, the number of SMEs registered had increased by 127 per cent over the same period last year, raising the registered capital by 128 per cent.

According to the Vietnam Association of Small and Medium Industrial Enterprises (Vasmie), its 1,500 members make up 22.5 per cent of the national gross domestic product and have created millions of jobs.

All these augur well for the future of Vietnam for, like Malaysia, it has set its eyes to be a developed country by 2020. With strong portfolio investment inflows and foreign direct investments hitting the record level of more than US\$60 billion (RM210 billion) this year (based on a source from the European Chamber of Commerce in Vietnam), the goal is most likely to be achieved.

Still, Vietnam cannot totally ignore the many other challenges that accompany development. Its leading newspaper (Viet Nam News, Nov 24) gives some clues as to what these challenges could be. A glaring one, for example, relates to water governance and the dumping of untreated waste water into rivers. This in turn has led to the decline of the fish and shrimp-rearing business.

They also face the problem of contaminated water entering aquaculture ponds on its way to the sea. A case in point is the Thi Vai river that has remained contaminated for at least a decade and has lost its ability to self-clean, to quote the Institute of Tropical Biology in Ho Chi Minh City.

Another case is the pollution of the sole source of spring water where a golf course is located, affecting residents of the Lam Son Commune. The spring water is tainted by chemicals, including insecticide, making the water source "undrinkable". But the majority of residents are forced to use the untreated water due to the lack of alternative water sources.

In Ho Chi Minh City, a survey showed seepage of organic matter from a large cemetery had polluted the soil. Again, residents have no alternative but to use the heavily polluted groundwater.

Apparently, the situation in rural areas is no better. A report tabled at a rural and agricultural environment conference in the central region of Vietnam indicated 85 per cent of the rural population has no clean water (VNN, Nov 25). As a result, the number of people contracting intestinal diseases has skyrocketed of late.

Last year, 88 per cent of diarrhoea cases in the region were linked to the lack of clean water. The report also noted that several rural areas witnessing urbanisation also recorded environmental pollution.

Initiatives like the Mekong Region Water Dialogue are aimed at helping improve water quality but emerging economies like Vietnam need to ensure development is sustainable.

Non-renewable sources like water and energy, by and large, must be managed well so that the quality of life can be further enhanced.

It must also be borne in mind that the United Nations' report on climate change, released ahead of the early December meeting in Poznan, Poland, has also warned developing countries to expect the worst when it comes to water-related issues. It has warned of rain, floods and drought.

Climate models have indicated that Vietnam can expect the worst if it is not vigilant.

We must not forget that the rush towards material prosperity cannot be decoupled from that of environmental prosperity if the quality of life is to be sustained for generations to come. Like Vietnam, Malaysia, too, must take precautions, especially when it comes to water governance.

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