

An Earth increasingly full of uncertainties

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Article

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On April 22, the world celebrated Earth Day, a global environmental event which began in 1970.

Around the world, millions of people gathered to show their support to mark the day that has increasingly become significant to the people of this earth.

Today, the concern has gone beyond the mundane issues of air and water pollution, toxic dumps, pesticide abuses, or destruction of flora and fauna.

Our attention is drawn to the issue of oil prices which now stands at more than US\$110 (RM345) per barrel.

Reportedly, the group of oil producing countries are not too keen to mitigate the soaring prices, blaming it on the mismanagement of the global economy.

The world, in turn, has little choice but to resign itself to the fact that the cost of fuel will continue to climb. Malaysia, already subsidising billions of ringgit, may have to fork out even more to keep the fuel price at an affordable level.

While countries are adjusting to this harsh reality and resulting knock-on effects, another commodity has been hit by the global price increase. This time it is a commodity that is even more crucial to our survival—rice.

Reports are rife that the price of rice will continue to increase in the immediate future. Rice-exporting countries, such as Thailand, being the world's largest, cannot guarantee that the price of white rice will not increase.

Some sources have predicted that it will cost US\$1,000 per tonne soon, after a rise of 150 per cent over the last 10 months. The price last June was about US\$340 per tonne, and the current price of US\$850 is a two-fold hike. The ultimate question is: Will it show a similar trend like oil?

While there is no reason to panic yet, the future looks worrying nevertheless because the situation is ripe for exploitation by greedy profiteers.

Hoarding and corruption have already been confirmed in neighbouring countries, leaving the poor in dire need. It has led to street protests and at least one leader of a country has been forced to resign. Reportedly, not only are the mills holding back their stocks, some countries are planning to cut their exports as well.

Although still well within control, Malaysia is vulnerable as far as food security is concerned. We are yet to be self-sufficient, as far as rice is concerned, reasserting yet again the importance of our agriculture agenda.

The allocation of RM4 billion announced recently for rice cultivation may be a good start, providing a large swathe of land can be found, bearing in mind that land, too, is a scarce resource. What once used to be vast areas of rich padi fields, we find factories today.

What is worse is the intricately intertwined factor of global warming and climate change, including the more frequent incidences of freak weather worldwide.

Nowhere is the impact of this more dramatic than on agriculture in developing countries where rice is the staple food, and resources are very limited. And the overall long-term solution may not be as simple.

Even Australia, which produced enough rice for 20 million people worldwide, has seen a large reduction, leading to the collapse of the country's rice production and the closure of some mills last December.

This, in part, could be traced to a long-standing drought, underscoring the fact that climate change has something to do with it as often warned by the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

The panel has in fact noted that "even slight warming would lower agricultural output in the tropics and subtropics".

In other words, the current rice crisis is just a harbinger of what is to come if we continue to ignore the many signals that nature has displayed thus far. We are not only fast-approaching an energy-starved world but soon it will also face food shortages as well.

Unless we drastically shift our thinking and lifestyles towards a more sustainable one in all respects —including the ecological, socio-cultural and economical aspects—the harshest effects yet are just around the corner and are most likely to impact the poor and middle-income population globally. We are most definitely set for upheavals and a grim future. As is often quoted, there is enough for everyone's need, but not for everyone's greed.

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