

No room for 'green imperialism'

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Article

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SECOND Finance Minister Tan Sri Nor Mohamed Yakcop was quoted (by Time, July 9) using the words "green imperialism" in reference to countries, which despite taking advantage of China's cheap labour, complained about her greenhouse gas emissions.

The choice of words is indicative of the hypocrisy practised by some countries. It reminded us of similar terms such as "ecological imperialism" used to describe the state of the environment as a result of development.

It is appropriate to understand why things are the way they are.

Long before the developed world proudly claimed its exclusive status, their environment was still in a pristine state. It was during an intense economic period of so-called "development" that the "deforestation" of Europe took place.

It eventually brought tremendous changes in natural systems of water, plant and animal life throughout Europe. Large portions of Europe's flora and fauna were over-harvested, rendering the land infertile.

European civilisation was literally dominated by wood, be it in terms of houses, machinery, tools or transport carriages. Even the source of energy for industries, ranging from bakeries to ironworks, was wood-based.

The great forests were steadily and recklessly depleted to serve that civilisation. By the 16th century, there were virtually no old-growth areas or natural ecosystems left (Sale, 1990). Sale wrote that "no alteration of the landscape was so profound or purposeful as the erasure of the European forests".

Unfortunately, the damage was not contained within the European borders. Fuelled by the rise in population and the devastation of the European ecosystem, the need to expand became even more urgent. It took the form of an expansionist "ecological" policy, leading to further environment exploitation and degradation spanning the globe.

Until today, the impact is still evident due to the failure to account for the sustainability of such action over the long term.

For example, based on the 2004 ecological footprint report, the most developed countries chalked a large ecological footprint.

While the world's average is 2.18 global hectares per capita, the footprint for the US is 9.57 and Canada 8.56. For Sweden, Australia and Finland, it is between 8 and 7; and for France, Portugal, Denmark, Switzerland, Belgium and Luxembourg it falls between 6 and 5. All of them exceeded the world's average by at least two times, indicating that they are living beyond their means.

It is not surprising that among the world's 25 biodiversity areas, only a couple are located in the developed countries, notably California and south-west Australia. Still, in total, it covers only 1.4 per cent of the Earth's land surface area, where nearly half of all plant species and a third of terrestrial vertebrate species are said to be found.

The pressure to develop these areas continues unabated, notwithstanding the impact caused by previously unmitigated human actions. The impact, both environmentally and socially, has been of unimaginable proportions.

Only recently is this being given serious consideration vis-a-vis the purported "benefits" often promoted as part of the global development agenda.

In so doing, whatever pool of resources that were traditionally conserved and sustained by the indigenous and local people for generations are suddenly found wanting.

Ironically, when the former colonies tried to emulate their colonial masters in the same development model, they were reprimanded.

This is done to the extent of fabricating facts, over-generalisation or practising blatant double standards, as in the case cited by the Second Finance Minister. This, no doubt, is related to the fact that the spent "imperialistic powers" are now no longer the direct beneficiaries of such development, unlike in the past.

Then, the colonies were encouraged to convert their abundant forest resources into plantations for the cultivation of economic crops such as rubber, tobacco, cotton or tea to meet the demand in the European market and its allies. Other considerations, including the abuse of the environment and people, were of little consequence then.

Such is the game of hypocrisy on the global scene, more so now as globalisation gets more intense, particularly by countries that had long squandered their own natural resources. As expected, new commodities like palm oil are convenient targets.

Recognising this, countries which are still endowed with natural resources must act responsibly —but not because they are harassed to do so. Rather, they owe it to the future generations not to repeat the dubious mistakes of the colonial past.

As for Malaysia, given that its ecological footprint is 2.99 (just slightly above the world's average), the way forward on the eve of its 50 years' of nationhood is clear. For sure, there can be no room for any form of colonialism and imperialistic intrusion, not even the green ones!

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