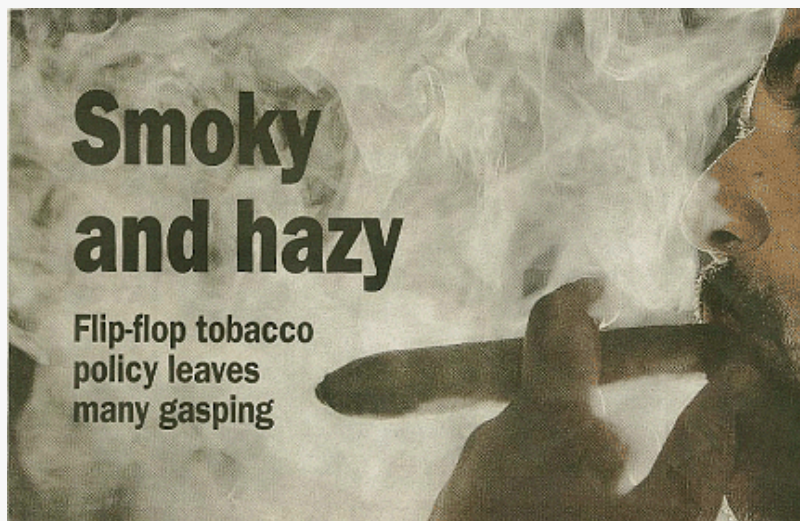


Smoky and hazy

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THESE are hazy times and Malaysian are praying and hoping that on *Merdeka* Day, the air will be clear, and the haze blown far away.

There is a good chance that blue skies will be here again, if only many more of the so-called hotspots are extinguished, giving Malaysians the much needed breath of fresh air to celebrate National day.

This is in contrast to another situation where almost full control could be asserted but somehow there seems some reluctance.

We are referring to the many millions of little hotspots — the cigarettes which produce a multitude of toxic fumes — and fatal ones at that. There are many poisonous particulates and fumes in cigarette smoke.

One of them is carbon monoxide, a silent killer gas, similar to that found in motor vehicle emissions or haze. More than a dozen of these cause cancer.

All these are firm rationale why smoking is banned in many public places, now an international norm.

In fact, a neighbouring country had recently announced the widening of the ban, while elsewhere in Brussels, the European Court of Justices is seeking to rule on "singles" — the roll-up, "self-assembled" cigarettes, a version of the *rokok daun*.

Because of an excise duty gap, they are cheaply available, and the court is keen to rectify this. Unfortunately, Malaysia doesn't seem to be serious about overcoming the smoking problem.

This can be amply demonstrated through the many policy shifts (some call it "flip-flops").

The latest being the U-turn on the ban of small or 'kiddy' pack of cigarettes which is deferred until 2010.

The priority seems to be the 13,000 tobacco farmers (read: voters) rather than the almost equivalent number of 10,000 who die annually due to the same tobacco.

Some 40,000 lives will be sacrificed before the ban comes into effect. What a high price to pay.

The U-turn, coming so soon after the screaming headline on The New Straits Time Aug 18 front page: s: "Teens say 'Nak' — One in four aged 13-17 puffing away", is not acceptable.

Did we not look at the sobering statistics, namely that 30 per cent of all smokers nationwide are young women, when just a few years ago the figure was less than one per cent?

Does not the Cabinet take these into consideration?

What more, in the already burdened rural population, which is mostly Malay, children as young as six smoke.

If that is still not sobering enough, listen to what the president of Public Health Specialist Association was

quoted as saying:

"For many years, we have only been seeing older people, aged 50 and above, suffering lung cancer. Now we see patients as young as 18."

Isn't this a grave indictment on the failure to protect the welfare of our youngsters?

Why then are we still taking a very compromising stance on the issue?

Are we not "selling" the future of our youths to the tobacco companies, just because we are economically hooked to the crumbs dangled by the merchants of death.

Just like the desperate addicted housewife, who sold her two-year-old daughter to support her habit which was reported on the front page of the NST on Aug 18, with the headline: "Addict sells daughter".

At the same time when the shocking statistics were made public, another English-language tabloid reported in its business section that the Malaysian branch of the world's largest tobacco company, Philip Morris, had opened a state-of-the art cast leaf plant at its manufacturing facility in Seremban.

Costing RM100 million, the facility is said to be the first in the Asia-Pacific region.

The launching was blessed by no less than the Minister of Plantation Industries and Commodities last week.

Did we not realise we have just allowed a "weapon of mass destruction" in our midst? The new plant is capable of processing tobacco dust and broken up tobacco leaves resulting from various stages in the manufacturing process and cast them into sheets.

While it can reduce wastage and result in better utilisation of raw tobacco materials, it also means that more tobacco will be made available for cigarette production to be consumed and kill its users, at least indirectly.

To add insult to injury, the same tobacco company has been implicated in research cover-ups about the dangers of second-hand or passive smoke, according to a recent issue of Lancet.

According to Amy Morison, writing for the Medical Tribune (May), the study conducted by a group from the School of Public Health, University of Sydney "accused Philip Morris of deliberately concealing findings that describe the potential dangers of passive smoking".

Despite such unethical practices that are well-documented, Malaysia has once again succumbed to the lure of millions of *ringgit* dangled by the tobacco companies and put the health of its population at greater risk.

Although it is expected that any industry will look for ways to improve its efficiency by incorporating new technologies to remain competitive, the choice of location is also an important factor. The fact that Malaysia is chosen as the preferred location in this case is hardly flattering.

In the same way, it is also not flattery that Malaysia is chosen as the site for a tobacco conference and exposition in November.

Many quarters have seen through this and have already urged the authorities, namely the Ministry of Health, to denounce, if not cancel, the tobacco conference.

But to date, the ministry's silence continues to be deafening, as though the country is beholden to the tobacco industry.

The time has come to unshackle the nation's destiny from the grip of the tobacco industry, in the true spirit of the *Merdeka*, one that is independent of tobacco.

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