



Thursday December 11, 2008

The day the earth moved

Stories by TEH ENG HOCK and NG CHENG YEE

It had been raining for days but no one paid any attention. Exactly 15 years ago today, a Saturday, many families were at home for lunch, looking forward to a happy weekend. They were soon to realise that their lives would be changed forever.

At about 1.30pm, the soil from the hill above Highland Towers in Hulu Klang moved and literally felled Block One at its base. The rainy season had caused the soil uphill to erode, and water seeped down causing soil movement below the three-block condominium.

Block One sank, causing its foundations to crack and the whole 12-storey building toppled over like a pack of cards, trapping those who could not flee quickly enough. Search and rescue operations were a nightmare and even the arrival of the Japanese disaster relief team and French Civil Defence team on Dec 13 did little to help.

They stopped after 12 days – with 48 dead and thousands homeless. There is an almost deafening silence in the area now, overgrown with trees and creepers. The remaining two blocks have been vandalised and graffiti is all over the structures.

There are no more road signs leading visitors to Highland Towers. Walking up the remains of the tarred road, one sees the two lone buildings, eerie and quiet – serving as a lesson, a lesson we may not have quite learned yet.

CHRONOLOGY OF EVENTS

1975 -1978: Highland Properties Sdn Bhd develops Highland Towers in front of a slope it owns in Taman Hillview, Hulu Selangor.

1991: Developer transfers ownership of the hillslope to Arab Malaysian Finance Bhd due to outstanding loans.

Dec 11, 1993: Heavy rains cause a landslide and the 12-storey Block One of Highland Towers collapses, killing 48 people. Over 1,000 residents in two other blocks are made homeless.

Dec 15, 1993: The Highland Towers Owners and Residents Committee, headed by Dr Benjamin George, is set up.

Dec 5, 1996: Seventy-three residents file a suit against 10 parties who they claim were jointly and/or severally liable for causing or contributing to the collapse of Block One and the subsequent abandonment of the other two.

Nov 3, 1997: Coroner's Court finds no incriminating factors in the 48 deaths and rules the incident was not a natural disaster but which could be considered a misadventure.

Aug 10, 1998: The High Court begins the hearing of a suit by the 73 plaintiffs.

Aug 11, 2000: The High Court finds Arab Malaysian Finance Bhd and five others liable for the collapse of Block One. Ampang Jaya Municipal Council is negligent of pre- and post-collapse events but only 15% liable for the latter.

Dec 3, 2002: The Court of Appeal dismisses the appeals of four defendants.

August 2004: AmFinance Bhd (formerly AMFB) agrees to pay RM52mil to 139 residents and owners of Highland Towers.

Feb 17, 2006: Federal Court rules that MPAJ not liable either for the pre- and post-collapse events at Highland Tower.

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After 15 years, the pain is still felt by those who lost their kin

Stories by **TEH ENG HOCK** and **NG CHENG YEE**

KUALA LUMPUR: It was 15 years ago, but tears still flow from Highland Towers survivor Phang Ah Heng's eyes every time he hears a particular song on the radio. The former businessman lost his mother, wife and son on Dec 11, 1993.

"I don't cry very much now. Except when I'm driving, and I hear the song which my wife used to sing to me," said the 73-year-old when met at the site yesterday. His mother Cheng Kim Tai, wife Ivy Lee and son Fergus, who were 84 years, 56 years and 26 years respectively at the time, perished together with 45 other residents of Highland Towers. It was exactly 15 years ago today that soil movement brought down Block One of Highland Towers at about 1.30pm.



Pensive: Phang at the site of the two remaining blocks. He lost three members of his family during the Highlands Tower tragedy – his mother Cheng Kim Tai, his wife Ivy Lee and son Fergus. He says the sound of rain pouring down the hill still makes him sad. — AZMAN GHANI / The Star

Three people were rescued at 4.30pm on the first day – Indonesian Umi Rashidah Khoruman, 27, her 18-month-old daughter Norhidah Nadjib, and Japanese Noriyuki Nakajima, 50. However, Nakajima died about eight hours later. Rescue operations stopped after 12 days, and residents of the remaining two blocks moved out shortly after. Road signs leading visitors to Highland Towers have been removed, and those who manage to locate the site would have to park their vehicles before proceeding on foot using the remains of a tarred road that leads to the former three-block condominium. Only two blocks now stand.

Residents like Phang are learning over the years to get over the pain, but the scars of their emotional wounds remain. For three months, Phang spent every day crying at the cemetery. “I couldn’t help it. I guess I wanted to be with them, to feel less stressed. There were times when I thought of committing suicide. “And nature doesn’t help you much. When it rains, water rolls from the hills down to the graveyard, reminding you of the tragedy,” he said. And the tears roll from the eyes.

Tuesday December 16, 2008

Special unit to keep an eye on Sabah projects

KUDAT: Sabah wants local authorities to set up a special unit to investigate and monitor the safety of all development projects. State Local Government and Housing Minister Datuk Hajiji Mohd Noor said that this was necessary as public safety was a key issue in any development project, particularly the high-risk ones. “My ministry will prepare a Cabinet paper to allow for the setting up of a special unit comprising professionals. “Such a unit is necessary to find solutions to problems arising from big and high-risk development projects,” said Hajiji at the opening of a seminar for officers in local authorities here yesterday.

He added that the unit could also monitor and investigate structures as well as check on the electrical wiring of buildings, including old structures. Hajiji said the unit would comprise experts from the Public Works Department, Drainage and Irrigation Department, Environment Department and other relevant agencies. Citing the recent Bukit Antarabangsa landslide incident, Hajiji told local government officials not to approve development projects in high-risk areas. “A detailed study must be carried out and development guidelines should be issued if ever there is a need to carry out development in high-risk

Tuesday December 16, 2008

Make the polluters pay, says group

By LESTER KONG

PETALING JAYA: The loggers and miners responsible for polluting Tasik Chini should pay for its clean-up, and not taxpayers, said the Malaysian Nature Society (MNS).

"It is not right, and it doesn't make sense, that the polluters are allowed to get away," said MNS president Datuk Seri Dr Salleh Mohd Nor.

He said, at the very least, Pahang should withhold the deposits paid by the loggers and miners if they failed to reduce or reverse the impact their works had on the ecology of the freshwater lake, the second largest in the country.



Choking ecology: Tasik Chini has suffered from years of pollution brought about by logging and mining.

It was reported that Pahang would request RM4mil from the Federal Government to rehabilitate Tasik Chini, which has suffered from years of pollution brought about by logging and mining. "The right principles must be put in place. If I go and dirty your home, would you go and ask money from the authorities to clean it up? Of course not," said Dr Salleh.

While there were laws to try polluters in the country, they were next to useless because enforcement was lax, he lamented. He said one of the points often overlooked was what he called the externalities of the industries' impact on the land. "This is when the effects of pollution is felt somewhere far away from the source of the pollution," he said.

"Polluters often use this as an excuse to save themselves (because the effects are not in the immediate area of their operations). "The law must make sure that these externalities are recognised so that polluters can be held responsible." Dr Salleh also said the RM4mil Pahang sought fell far short of the budget needed to clean up Tasik Chini. "So much impact over the years could have made the lake acidic. Once the water quality is affected, the whole ecology of the lake changes. The fishing grounds of the orang asli would be impacted, too." He urged industry players to be responsible corporate citizens and ensure that the environment is not affected by their activities.

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Water deal with Malacca PAAB to take over assets

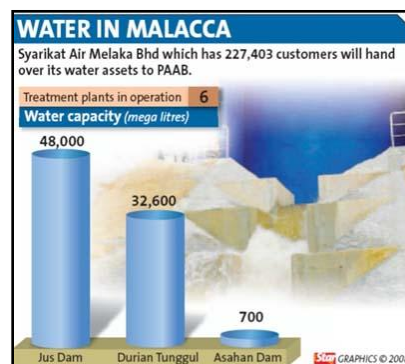
By B.K. SIDHU

more states expected to follow suit

PETALING JAYA: After months of negotiations, Pengurusan Aset Air Bhd (PAAB) has struck its first water deal – to take over all the water assets from the Malacca government. The signing of the agreement is scheduled for tomorrow and it involves Syarikat Air Melaka Bhd (SAMB) handing over three dams and six treatment plants to PAAB. In return for the assets, PAAB will contra off the outstanding loan of over RM700mil that SAMB owes the Government.

The signing is expected to be witnessed by Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak, Malacca Chief Minister Datuk Seri Mohd Ali Mohd Rustam, Finance Minister II Tan Sri Nor Mohamed Yakcop and Energy, Water and Communications Minister Datuk Shaziman Abu Mansor. PAAB is a wholly owned unit of Minister of Finance Inc while SAMB is wholly owned by the Malacca government.

After handing over the water assets, SAMB, which has 227,403 customers, will still manage the water supply operations in Malacca. SAMB is set to ink another agreement with PAAB to lease back the assets for 45 years whereby it will continue to supply water to its customers in the state.



Under the leaseback arrangement, SAMB would have to pay PAAB about RM2.2mil every month, sources said. But PAAB will undertake any future capital expenditure incurred. SAMB is said to be able to generate average revenue of RM10.2mil every month. The signing tomorrow will mark a major milestone for PAAB as many states have been delaying the negotiations for the handover of their water and sewerage assets although the Government has made it clear that it wants to restructure the water sector.

The handover of assets is part of the national water services industry restructuring initiative undertaken by the Government involving Peninsular Malaysia and Labuan. It is to ensure that

there is uniformity in tariff, legislation, rules and procedures in all the 11 states. It is surprising that Malacca has wrapped up the deal faster than Negri Sembilan, which was earlier the frontrunner to complete the transfer of assets to PAAB.

PAAB had also hoped to seal at least two deals this year but negotiations with some states have taken a long time due to complexities since some states had earlier privatised their own water sector. Tomorrow's signing is expected to be a prelude to at least three to four more state governments handing over their assets to PAAB next year. The restructuring of the water sector in Peninsular Malaysia and Labuan is crucial for Malaysians as access to clean water is a basic need, hence the reason for setting up PAAB.

PAAB will take over water-related loans totalling RM7.6bil from the state governments. Eventually, PAAB would have water and sewerage assets worth more than RM15bil in the 11 states. Besides taking over the assets, PAAB will plan future water needs in the country and all future capital expenditure will be borne by PAAB.

The industry has since Jan 1 been governed by the new Water Services Industry Act 2006 and regulated by the National Water Services Commission (SPAN). Meanwhile, Selangor water sector-related stocks were up yesterday on speculation of possible compensation from the Government for deferring the tariff hike from January to March next year. Kumpulan Perangsang Selangor was up 12 sen to RM1.45 and Puncak Niaga Bhd rose 8 sen to RM2.48.

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Syabas assures residents that reservoirs are safe

By CHRISTINA LOW

SYARIKAT Bekalan Air Selangor (Syabas) has assured the residents of Lorong Setiabistari at Bukit Damansara in Petaling Jaya that the minor landslip that happened at 5pm on Sunday was no cause for worry. According to Syabas general manager (corporate communications and public affairs) Abdul Halem Mat Som, the two reservoirs located on the hill slope opposite their homes are safe.



Assurance: Abdul Halem says Syabas has stationed its officers at the site of the landslip.

“At present there is no immediate danger to the reservoirs as they are situated some 50 metres away from the minor landslip,” Halem said. “However for precaution, Syabas is reducing the amount of water in both reservoirs,” he said.

In the incident on Sunday evening, stones and earth rolled down from the hillslope and gave the residents a fright. Following the recent Bukit Antarabangsa landslide which caused the loss of lives and massive damage to property, people living beneath and near hillside areas are having sleepless nights, particularly during downpours and thunderstorms.

The Lorong Setiabistari residents are obviously jittery and concerned as they feared that the landslide on the hill slope may indicate the start of an erosion which could cause damage to the reservoirs and pose a danger to their lives and homes. “The residents do not have to worry. The two reservoirs are so far safe,” Halem said.

However, he said if a downpour was to occur, it would definitely worsened the condition of the landslide area, and might put the reservoirs at risk. Halem said Syabas had stationed its officers at the site until work at the area was completed. “Syabas will meet officers from the Kuala Lumpur City Hall (DBKL), the Public Works Department (PWD) and the National Water Commission Services (SPAN) to discuss the matter,” he said.

In the Sunday evening incident, many residents were taken by surprise when they noticed monkeys scrambling for shelter, only to realised later that a landslide had occurred. They immediately informed the Fire and Rescue Service Department for assistance. A resident, who only wanted to be known as Tan, said the officers from the Fire and Rescue Service Department arrived just minutes after their call and advised families of five houses to evacuate for the night.



Monitoring: Police officers are at the junction leading into Lorong Setiabistari where the landslide occurred.

Steve Teoh, who was not home during the incident, said six years ago a similar landslide occurred at the same slope. “After the incident, a stone hill with sheet pile was constructed at the site, but it only concentrated on a small area instead of the whole stretch,” he said.

Teoh, who has lived in the area for the past 20 years, said regular monitoring and maintenance of the drainage in the area, especially those on hillslopes, should be done to ensure safety. At press time, the DBKL is still inspecting the site and evaluating its safety.

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Cracks driving residents out

Story and photos by GEETHA KRISHNAN

TAMAN Bukit Mewah Phase 1, Kajang, resident Ramli Bahari, 56, first noticed cracks on his car porch in 1999. On Monday, the pensioner was packing up his belongings to move temporarily into his son's house. He fears the large cracks in his house have made the structure unsafe.

"It doesn't take experts to realise this fact but where are we to go? After countless meetings, press conferences and site visits by the relevant authorities, nothing has been done to guarantee our safety.



Unsafe: Shafie pointing to the gap in the wall of Ramli Bahari's house.

"Most of us here are pensioners and we cannot take another housing loan. At least my son is willing to take me in," he said with a tinge of sadness in his voice. Ramli's home is one of 58 similarly affected houses in Jalan Bukit Mewah 20 and 21, possibly due to soil instability as a result of water seepage from an underground spring.

Every resident sharing his plight tells the same story, that the situation is worsening and lives are at peril. From 34 damaged houses in the initial stage, the number now stands at 58 with 80% of the residents forced to move out. The walls, many with huge gaps, are in danger of collapsing and the ceilings are caving in. Windows are out of shape and the sliding doors are bent. Many doors do not close.

In 2005, Malaysian Public Works Institute (Ikram) declared that 32 houses needed to be torn down and rebuilt as repairs alone were not adequate to ensure the structures' safety.

"If there is anything to learn from the recent Bukit Antarabangsa tragedy, now is the time for the authorities to act and act fast before lives are lost," said Taman Bukit Mewah Phase 1 action committee vice-chairman Samsuri Abdullah.



Dangerous: Taman Bukit Mewah Phase 1, Kajang, residents are urging the relevant authorities to ensure their safety by strengthening the retaining wall separating the housing area from the bungalows above.

He was also referring to the 15m-high retaining wall separating the housing scheme from private bungalows. Samsuri said the slope had a 75-degree gradient and water trickled from it.

Bangi assemblyman Dr Shafie Abu Bakar, who met the residents, said he would bring up the matter at the state assembly and urged the Kajang Municipal Council (MPKj) to send its team to the site.

The council issued a directive to the developer in July last year to repair the damaged houses and award compensation to the residents but since the Certificate of Fitness (CF) was issued in 1997, the developer claims that it is no longer responsible for the repairs and rebuilding.