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All choked up

THE Sg Kayu Ara river in Petaling Jaya meanders through the city passing through residential districts and well-known commercial landmarks.

Yet what should be a seamless flow is blocked; heaps of rubbish piled up on the surface with construction rubble and earth lining the riverbanks.

During a visit to four sites along the river together with Petaling Jaya Utara MP Tony Pua, we witnessed more than just river silting. The greater concern was the social and environmental impact the condition posed.

Further upstream we came across a settlement made up of mainly foreigners who had built wooden houses along the riverbank.

The foreigners have also illegally built bridges over the river to be linked to another colony.

Pua said most of these foreigners might even claim to have land titles since they were bold enough to build the houses.

"Even if they have one, I don't think it was obtained in a proper manner. Moreover, it's illegal to build houses on reserve land that belongs to the Department of Drainage and Irrigation (DID)," said Pua.

He said without a proper sewerage system the waste from the settlement flowed into the river.

"Apart from the silt, I'm thinking of a more pressing issue - the health risk of such a living condition. The river downstream will be at an unhealthy state and would have gotten shallower over the years," said Pua.

The embankments built along the riverbank were either incomplete or unable to cope with the rising waters whenever it rained.

Residents, who lived on the hill slope near the settlement, said the foreigners had been around for many years and they're more of them now.

"We are concerned about our safety, too, due to their presence," said one of the residents.

Moving on to the second site in Jalan Jenjarom Damansara Jaya, further shock greeted us in the form of another foreign settlement clinging onto a hill slope well hidden from the main view of the roads.

The hill slope was also treated as a dumpsite with rubbish everywhere.

"I'm shocked to see this. This place reminds me of the 1970s Vietnamese refugee camp in Sg Besi! It's shocking to learn that we still have problems like these in an upmarket city like Petaling Jaya," said Pua.

River silting has become a major concern as it leads to flash floods and other social, environment and health problems. *StarMetro* visits Sg Kayu Ara in search of the real issues behind the silting.



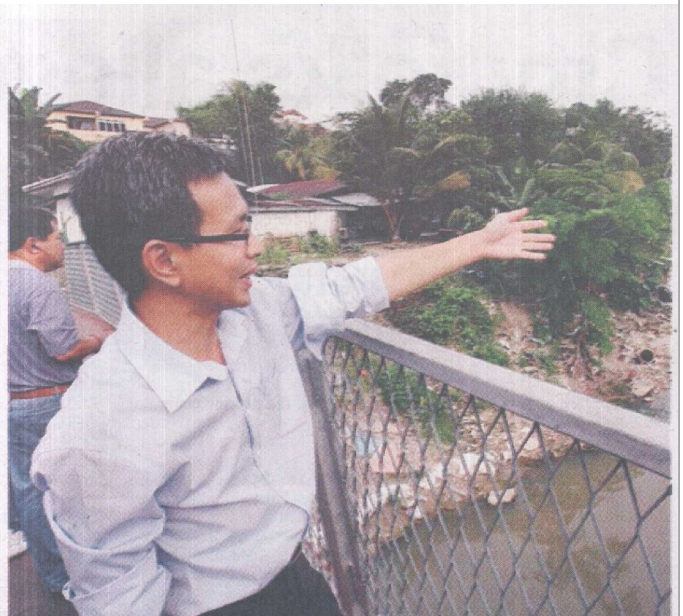
Not complete: The embankments are either half complete or inadequate.

At the third site near Kg Chempaka in Taman Mayang, restaurant operator Loke Moon Hoong, who has been running his business there for the past 30 years, said the surrounding area had experienced floods three times in the last two months.

"The worst flood was as high as two metres," said Loke.

He claimed that this boiled down to a poor drain drainage system that couldn't accommodate the water volume and the mushrooming of scrap metal factories near the riverbank that caused silting.

The Global Environment Centre (GEC) river care programme coordinator Dr K. Kalithasan said river silting was due to encroachment of the river reserve and the lack of proper land management, and the local council in this case shared a bigger portion of the responsibility.



Something need to be done: Pua showing a part of the Sg Kayu Ara.

Not a pretty sight: The rubbish blocking part of the river.

"The pollution caused by the settlements coupled with illegal dumping by construction factories would have attributed to this," said Kalithasan.

"River management covers three main issues – prevention, rehabilitation, and monitoring.

"Part of our efforts is to work with the local community for prevention and monitoring.

"We had worked with the previous assemblymen on training the local community in Kg Kayu Ara in understanding their role in this matter, but the foreigners are the real problem," said Kalithasan.

He said the frequent floods were due to the concrete design of the embankments that straightened the river causing an increase in the volume and velocity of the water flow.

"When the design is meandering, water flow will be slower.

"Since the DID cannot be there at all times to monitor the culprits, perhaps the state can look into gazetted river banks," proposed Kalithasan.

Pua said his immediate measure was to work out a plan with the Petaling Jaya City Council (MBPJ) and form a team to tackle the

problem.

"We also have to resolve the foreign settlement issue," said Pua adding that the river silting was a state issue and a proper plan needed to be drawn out to address it.

Meanwhile, Associate Professor Dr Ahmad Ismail from the Biology Department of Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) said it was important for the government to enforce guidelines and regulations for any development near rivers.

"The authority must have a past, present and future expectation of the river condition and its surrounding areas.

"Consultants are needed to survey existing development, human activities, slopes and water quality," said Ahmad.

"The authority must also have a checklist of approvals from authorities like DID, Department of Environment (DoE), non-governmental organisations and the local council.

"We must look at the source of water and peripheral input into the river until the estuary," he added.

Kalithasan foresees the possibility of water shortage if the high level of pollution continues.

"The cost of water treatment and

tariff may increase since someone needs to bear the cost.

"If the pollution level is high, it may not be treatable so the natural diluting process has to take place."

When contacted, the state local government committee chairman Ronnie Liu admitted that there should be no development where riverbank reserves are concerned.

"We'll ensure proper monitoring is done together with the local councils and land office," said Liu.

"I'll work closely with the state environment chairman Elizabeth Wong on this issue."