



Dangerous development

Retired Drainage and Irrigation Department senior officers warn against attempts to greenlight for-profit projects around retention ponds in Kuala Lumpur, as any approval will jeopardise flood mitigation efforts in the long-run. >2&3

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RETIRED senior civil servants from the Drainage and Irrigation Department (DID) and Kuala Lumpur City Hall (DBKL) are disappointed that their efforts in creating policies to protect the city's water bodies from flooding are being reversed to benefit developers.

They are increasingly concerned about decisions to alienate land surrounding flood retention ponds, thereby overlooking recommendations and technical conditions that had been put in to protect flood retention ponds, mining ponds, lakes and rivers.

They view the move as a short-sighted approach to development that prioritises profit, and say it will make flood mitigation efforts even more difficult in the long run.

Former DBKL Drainage and River Management Department director Hooi Yoke Meng said that all efforts and work put into the Kuala Lumpur City Plan 2020 (KLCP2020) on flood prevention seemed to have been for nothing.

Hooi said he had worked with DBKL's Master Plan Department director Zainab Mohd Ghazali on the draft plan in the early 2000s to ensure that land surrounding flood retention ponds would be safeguarded from development.

"We put in recommendations for buffer conditions in the KLCP2020.

"During the drafting of the plan, I remember how Zainab insisted that we put conditions to make it difficult for anyone to develop land surrounding the ponds.

"During my time in DBKL, developers and even a (former) mayor came to see me to ask if they could take sand from the city's mining ponds, I said 'no way'.

"If you take too much sand from mining ponds, the embankment will collapse and increase the likelihood of floods," he said.

Hooi added that he had ensured the ponds were fenced up to prevent people from encroaching and stealing sand or using them for sand-washing activities.

"We were always fighting to protect our ponds like Bohol from developers, which is why we tried very hard to gazette the ponds, at least the ones under DBKL's jurisdiction," he said.

Hooi, who retired 10 years ago, said the bigger ponds like Batu and Taman Wahyu were under DID's jurisdiction.

"DID wanted to carry out flood mitigation works to protect Sungai Gombak, but today, sadly both ponds have been alienated

'Safety should supersede profit at retention ponds'

Experts: Any move to alienate surrounding land puts communities at risk

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A bird's eye view of the Taman Desa retention pond in Kuala Lumpur. — Filepic

for development.

"How did this happen?"

Taman Wahyu and Delima ponds were approved for development in 2017, while Batu and Batu 4 1/2 ponds were transferred to a third party, which means that the land surrounding the ponds is now under threat of being used for development.

Last month, the government cancelled the proposed alienation of land surrounding the Bohol flood retention pond in Seputeh to a private developer, following the company's failure to fulfil key technical requirements.

Community safety

Hooi is not the only senior civil servant who is disappointed.

"We didn't put in those buffer

conditions 'for fun'.

"Those technical requirements were put in to safeguard not only the ponds but also the safety of communities living around these water bodies and for future generations," said former DID director-general Datuk Abdullah Isnin.

"Based on studies done by DID and Japan International Cooperation Agency (Jica)

back in the 1990s, it was agreed that ex-mining ponds should not be developed.

"The area surrounding the ponds is crucial for flood mitigation."

Concurring with Abdullah, another former DID director-general Datuk Nor Hisham Mohd Ghazali, said that apart from space that was needed for the pond's expansion in the future,

the 50m setback was crucial for monitoring purposes.

"Essentially, the pond must be given room to expand and any activities on the land surrounding it must be easily monitored," he said.

He added that the buffer was also important for flora and fauna around the area to thrive.

"If you put a park there with walking trails — that's fine, but



Hooi says buffer conditions are worked into Kuala Lumpur City Plan 2020 to safeguard land surrounding ponds.



Abdullah says technical requirements are put in for the safety of communities living near retention ponds.



City folk are concerned that if this retention pond in Taman Wahyu, Kepong, is developed, it will reduce the water retention capability in Kuala Lumpur. — Filepic



Vehicles in Kuala Lumpur city centre during the 2021 floods. — Filepic

building any permanent structure is a no-no. We need space for the water," he said.

Former DID engineer Balachandran Naicker said reserve land surrounding flood ponds were sacrosanct.

"It cannot be touched and that includes the drain reserves, too. There cannot be any encroachment into the buffer area.

"In the long run, with climate change and global warming, those buffers need to be widened, that's why we have rivers, retention ponds, drains and even road reserves in the first place," he said.

All of the engineers stressed that the ponds need to be desilted and maintained regularly.

"Historically even after the big flood of 1971, flood mitigation efforts involved restructuring the three main rivers of Sungai Batu, Sungai Gombak and Sungai Klang, as well as deepening and widening the tributaries.

"Our defence against flooding also involved creating retention ponds to prevent low-lying areas from flooding as well as building three main dams at each river," said Balachandran.

In an exclusive interview last year, former Federal Territories of Kuala Lumpur Land and Mines Office (PTGWP) director Datuk Muhammad Yasir Yahya told *StarMetro* that for the gazette-

ment purposes, any landscaping or structures built on the land must also take into account the 50m-setback rule.

Muhammad Yasir said this would ensure that the area surrounding the edge of ponds would not be affected by development.

He added that a developer was required by DID to submit an erosion and sediment control plan and final title survey report before commencing work.

"We are not anti-establishment or anti-development," said Abdullah.

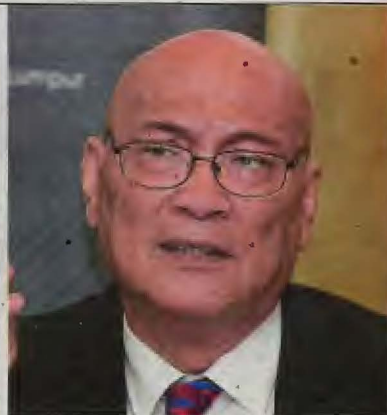
"Our duty as engineers and technical experts is to protect the environment.

"If we don't do it, future generations will blame us for destroying the environment and I don't want that on my conscience."

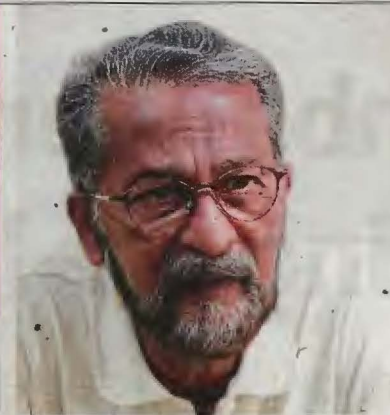
Former Kuala Lumpur mayor Datuk Seri Nor Hisham Ahmad Dahlan said development could take place as long as all rules pertaining to land zoning and density were adhered to and public feedback sought.

Nor Hisham, who was mayor from Oct 2, 2018 to Sept 30, 2020, said: "There are rules and conditions put forward before development orders are issued, and this must be done by the book.

"When I was mayor, there were a few cases pertaining to development on flood retention ponds in Kuala Lumpur.



Nor Hisham Ahmad Dahlan says there are technical requirements to ensure a retention pond's capacity is not compromised.



Balachandran says there cannot be any encroachment into the buffer area surrounding retention ponds.



Nor Hisham Mohd Ghazali says the 50m setback is crucial for monitoring purposes and potential pond expansion.

"When it comes to developing land near flood retention ponds, there are many technical requirements and conditions that need to be fulfilled before development is allowed.

"This is crucial so that the pond's capacity is not compromised.

"I faced a lot of interference from developers back then. I was not very popular but we have to do our jobs with a clear conscience," he said.

In a 2008 media report, former DID director-general Datuk Keizrul Abdullah suggested that the government gazette land surrounding flood retention ponds.

He said several parties had been eyeing flood mitigation ponds for development.

When the Dec 18, 2021, floods happened, several Kuala Lumpur

MPs called on the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) and the police to investigate possible abuse of power after six retention ponds in the city were approved for development.

Lembah Pantai MP Fahmi Fadzil, Segambut MP Hannah Yeoh and Cheras MP Tan Kok Wai lodged reports on Jan 1, 2022, at the Sentul police station.

Citing the Auditor-General's Report 2019 Series 2, the six retention ponds in question were Batu, Nanyang, Delima, Taman Wahyu, Batu 4½ and Tarian Desa.

Based on the AG's report, the pond land had been approved for transfer of ownership by PTGWP to four companies for residential and mixed development.

The MPs had called on the

authorities to investigate parties involved in the transfer of ownership for all ponds and if there were any elements of power abuse.

They were referring to the Taman Wahyu pond, which is part of the Sungai Jinjang Flood Retention Pond, whereby parts of the 32.3ha pond was transferred to a private developer on Oct 9, 2015, for a mixed development.

On March 16 the same year, then deputy Federal Territories minister Datuk Seri Jalaluddin Alias clarified in Parliament that of the six ponds, only Taman Wahyu and Delima in Kepong were approved for development.

Engineers and environmental experts have continued to push for the gazette-ment of remaining ponds to prevent land alienation for development.

