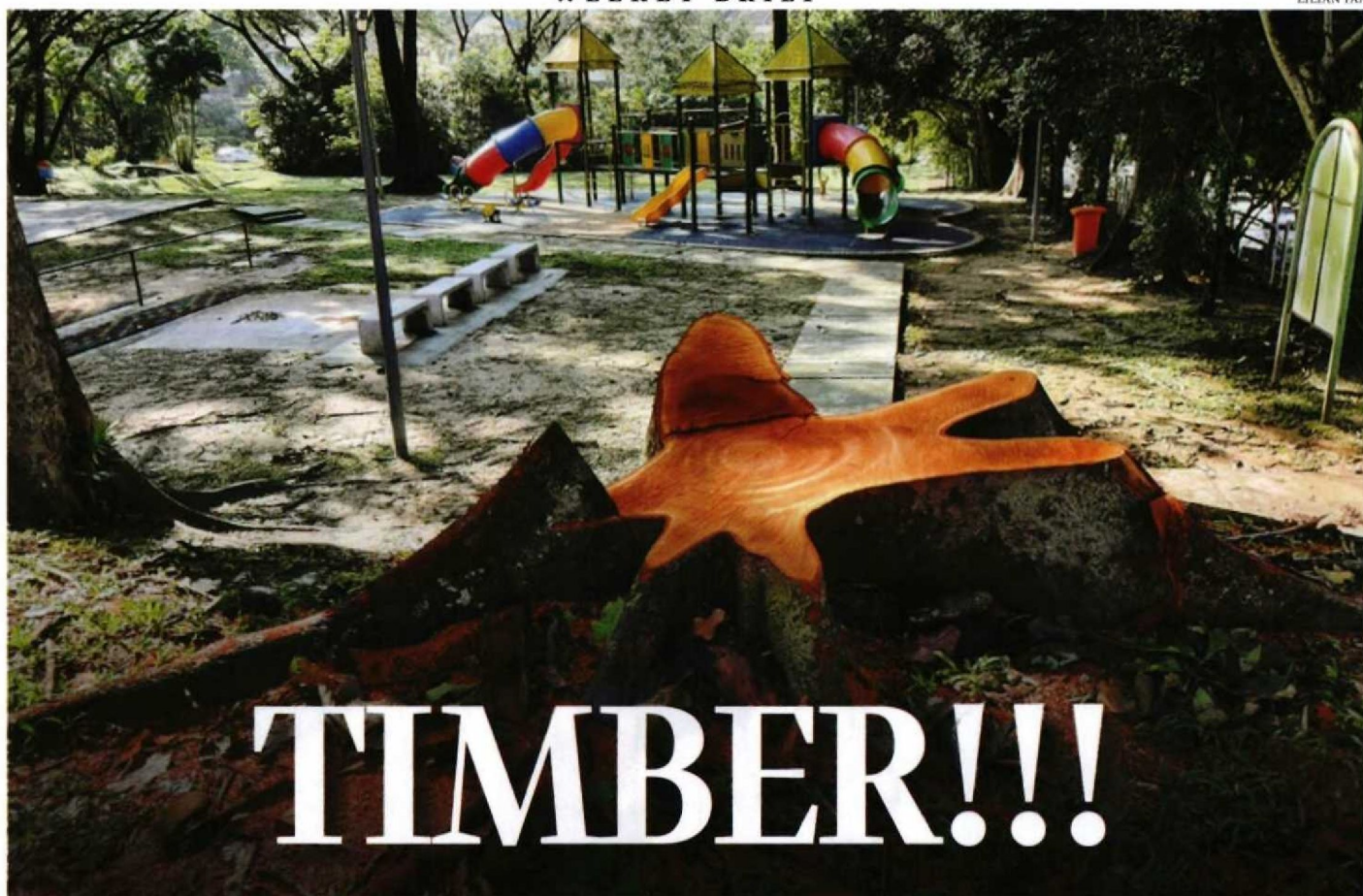




BY LILIAN TAN

Falling trees! If we were to run a poll of the topmost concerns of urban Malaysians in the last two weeks, this topic would probably win hands down (possibly even beating the fear of home-grown terrorism).

The danger of having a tree fall on a vehicle and kill someone has always been there but seemingly random, hence dismissed as bad luck. But no more. In fact, not until recently was the occurrence of falling trees — unlike floods and landslides — expected to cause such wide-scale destruction, and with such an alarming frequency; or serious enough to have warranted statements from the highest echelons of our government.

Following the past month's incidents, Federal Territories Minister Dr Zaliha Mustafa said Kuala Lumpur City Hall (DBKL) had been instructed to cut down high-risk trees around the city and develop new guidelines related to aged or high-risk trees; Housing and Local Government Minister Nga Kor Ming declared that the National Landscape Department would identify suitable species to be replanted along the roads of Kuala Lumpur. Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim ordered city mayor Datuk Seri Kamarulzaman Mat Salleh to plant 100 trees for every tree cut down (a pledge already made by Datuk Seri Mahadi Che Ngah, the previous mayor of Kuala Lumpur, in 2021).

Meanwhile, on May 10, DBKL assured the public that its ongoing monitoring of high-risk trees would continue, taking into account environmental preservation and conservation aspects.

According to DBKL, certified arborists had conducted regular inspections (with the most recent one in February) and, so far, a total of 175 trees — most of which are more than 50 years old — had been identified as high-risk, 147 had already been felled “through an appointed contractor” and another 28 would follow soon.

DBKL defined high-risk trees as “those with a high potential of experiencing structural failure and falling, and assessments of tree risk will take into account the physical condition of the tree on-site ... If the condition of the trees is unsatisfactory, further assessment will be conducted, and mitigation actions such as pruning, root treatment or tree removal will be implemented”.

We should feel reassured, but I worry. If 147 of the 175 trees identified as high-

risk trees have already been felled, with only 28 more to go, why do huge trees continue to uproot and fall almost every time there is a storm? Something is clearly amiss. How is it possible that the “certified arborists” contracted or employed by DBKL could have misidentified or even overlooked them?

There is a basis for my cynicism. On April 12, 2021, while visiting my father in Taman Seputeh, KL, I had a very disturbing encounter with a logging truck — the last thing one would expect to find in such a leafy neighbourhood — loaded with pieces of obviously valuable timber. I thought I had stumbled on an “illegal” logging operation, but to my horror, the truck driver told me that he worked for a DBKL contractor and his task was to remove the chopped timber from the playground nearby! He had no papers to show, but handed me his mobile phone to speak to his boss (phone ID: Kayu Balak), who confirmed that his company had been contracted by DBKL to undertake the job. The “boss” threatened to sue me if I continued to hold up the truck, saying that I could have halted the tree felling in the first place. This was ridiculous, since there had been absolutely no warning from DBKL that the tree would be chopped down.

I had to let the logging truck pass, but not before I took photos of its consignment for evidence. Meanwhile, an officer from the tree maintenance division of DBKL's Landscape and Recreation Development Department showed up at the playground to meet with a few other concerned residents, who demanded to know why the tree had been cut down on the morning of April 10, 2021.

The DBKL officer's answer: The tree was dead. This raised eyebrows among Taman Seputeh residents, as everyone could tell from the stump that the tree had been a very strong, mature and healthy one — most certainly premium commercial timber that would fetch a princely profit. Someone also pointed out at least two dead or half-dead trees nearby that were not felled. Why not? The felled tree was estimated to be more than 40 years old, but definitely not old or ailing in that it posed a risk of uprooting and falling down anytime soon. When a person suggested the felled tree would be sold for profit, the officer did not refute it. Nor did he deny there were other trees in the playground marked for the same fate.

Well, three years hence, we have a new federal government and a new mayor of

Kuala Lumpur, but my concern remains. Certainly, no one is so unreasonable as to oppose the felling of trees if they are in imminent danger of crashing, causing property damage and killing people. If safety is our priority, the trees should be removed — no argument there. However, tree-felling should always be the last resort. It is more important that the fitness of trees is monitored and maintained as part of a concerted long-term urban greening plan for the city by qualified arborists whose priority and commitment is to ensure the health of trees, without any commercial ties or obligations whatsoever to timber suppliers. And, surely, there must be absolute transparency, with at least two weeks' notice given if a tree is to be cut down so the residents in the neighbourhood have a chance to challenge and object if they believe the removal is not justifiable.

The callous felling of a majestic tree in Taman Seputeh on that fateful April morning in 2021 was executed with stealthy efficiency. No leaflets had been distributed, no warning signage or safety barricades had been put up to inform residents before the crane and chainsaw team arrived at the playground (where children play, mind you). Instead, motorists who parked their cars along the road were rudely ordered to remove them, and people who asked the crane operator to produce a DBKL permit were ignored. When it was over, residents were left to not only grieve the loss of a beloved tree, but also deal with debris, a broken railing and a shattered pavement, both of which were not repaired for weeks.

In Malaysia, warnings by conservationists of devastating deforestation have been ringing in our ears for decades but the problem has always seemed remote, as we are constantly told that our nation's loss of trees is the result of unsustainable logging and palm oil cultivation — activities that take place far away from urban areas, affecting indigenous people and our beloved endangered animals.

Sadly, this is an illusion, as the high profits for timber, mismanagement, poor regulation and enforcement by authorities have brought the problem right to our doorstep. The fact is we are now in danger of losing more good and perfectly healthy trees even in our very neighbourhoods and cities, and we must act before we witness and lament their loss in our own lifetimes. ■