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Effective Emergency Response

By: Engr. Mah Soo, *F.I.E.M., P.Eng.*

Year 2006 started with the flash floods in Shah Alam and ended with the recent flooding in the states of Johor, Melaka, Negri Sembilan and Pahang, which incidentally coincided with the second anniversary of the 2004 Tsunami tragedy. Though much has been publicised in the media with much sympathy from all Malaysians, the real impact and trauma will long be remembered only by those who have suffered the loss of lives and property. Whenever there are reports or forecasts of heavy downpour, residents in these affected areas will be gripped with the fear of recurrence wherever they would be at that period of time. How would we then exorcise this demon and be free from such fears?

It was encouraging to note that a voluntary evacuation was done in a calm manner by several hundred people living around the coastal areas near Kota Kinabalu, Sabah from their homes on 26 December 2006 following a tsunami alert after an undersea earthquake hit south-western Taiwan. This showed vast improvement from the one that happened in February 2006 when thousands of people fled their homes in panic when a tsunami alert was issued. This proves that 'Practice makes Perfect' is true and workable only when such 'Emergency Response Drills' are conducted at regular intervals to be effective to combat disasters, irrespective whether they are caused by nature or due to human folly.

If it is due to human activities that have caused flash floods and fire, then something must be done to prevent such unnecessary wasteful losses from recurrence. More than RM100 million and other valuable resources have been estimated for carrying out the evacuation, search and rescue operations, operations of relief centers, cleaning up the mess, the restoration and repair of bridges, roads and other amenities and the replacement costs for damaged personal belongings and which could have been put to better use in the development of our country. Last but not least, the impact will definitely affect our country's image to attract foreign participation in development projects as well as in tourism in the coming year.

Many things have been said and promised as publicised in the media during such floods and we hope that the valuable lessons learnt will help those in responsible positions to take concrete steps in planning and timely implementation to produce the expected results as promised to prevent further recurrences.

This should be a wake-up call for professionals from all walks of life to realise that things could not just happen by hoping some other people will take up the issues and do something about them. Maybe IEM could take this opportunity in making a New Year 2007 resolution of forming a task force to carry out a research to find the root cause of such floods, volunteer ourselves to participate in reviewing the nation's emergency rescue master plan and its drills with the aim of recommending strategic action plans to the government for effectiveness and put up a group of volunteers to answer the Government's call for relief workers backup as a form of national service to our community, society and country. ■