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KEEPING THE LIGHTS BURNING

By: Sdr. K.H. Man, Bulletin Editor

On 18 October 2004, our Prime Minister chaired the first meeting of a Cabinet Committee to study the impact of price increase of fuel and petroleum products on the economy. One immediate result was the announcement of renewed efforts to explore alternative energy sources. It is heartening to see that the country is taking steps in this direction. Guzzling an irreplaceable natural resource to fuel an escalating global consumption of goods cannot go on forever. It's time to slow down, make use of our brains and skills, and find solutions before we come up against an unyielding brick wall and end up splattered on it.

Some countries are already far ahead of us. Denmark, for example, has successful wind farms and biomass plants associated with dairy farms. Many countries subsidises the purchase of solar panels by home owners. Wind turbine technology is maturing fast. Elsewhere, net metering is practiced, and consumers may choose to pay a bit more for renewable energy. Engineers and scientists alike all over the world are feverishly working on new energy storage, generation and transmission technologies.

Yet at the same time it is also important to remember that change cannot take place instantly. It is easy to demand change, but fossil fuels have wormed its way into every nook and cranny of our lives—it will take time and we may have to make some sacrifices. Unfortunately, consumers are inherently selfish and the market demands to consume however much electricity or fuel they desire. The world's energy woes isn't really a technological or engineering problem at all; I believe it is largely a people problem, an artifact of a market that tries to convince you that your life is meaningless if you don't consume more and more products.

This month and the next, we bring you a number of stories from the power generation industry. Read about the efforts of our fellow engineers in bringing modern power generation technology to Malaysia. They have addressed environmental concerns, instituted world-class emissions standards, set up superior practices and maintenance standards, and looked at the possibilities of biomass energy.

Do we consider it perfect? Of course not—engineering is about trade-offs, not perfection. These are just some of the great many step that engineers, scientists, and the power generation industry will take now and in the future in order to bring electricity reliably to our homes. With oil prices stuck at a high level, changes are afoot. We are living in interesting times. In the meantime, the power generation industry has to keep the lights burning and the motors running.