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Take an integrated approach to safeguarding strategic assets

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When my children invited their friends over for Hari Raya this year, I told my wife to order most of the food, as it would save us a lot of time. One item on the must-have list was lemong. Lemang Abang Mie Putra Heights is the favourite for me and many other residents of Subang Jaya. The stall is located on Jalan Petaling in Section 28, Shah Alam, just beyond the boundary of the Subang Jaya City Council (MBSJ), but the owners named it Lemang Abang Mie Putra Heights because many of its regular customers are primarily from that township.

Abang Mie's lemong — glutinous rice in bamboo culms (stems) — is always well-cooked, soft and sticky, with the right amount of coconut milk and salt. Most importantly, the lemong is evenly cooked over a wood fire, and not crusty or hard. Served with rendang, it is as good as it gets.

When I decided to get the lemong on Saturday, April 12, the stall was no longer there and the site looked as if it had been dismantled by the city council. The stall had been there on the first day of Raya, when I bought eight stems of lemong.

"Don't tell me Abang Mie is operating without a licence," I said to myself while driving away. As I was about to make a U-turn, I saw the stall — on the other side of Jalan Petaling.

After ordering six stems, I asked the workers why they had moved. One said: "The old stall was sitting in the gas pipeline area, and we were told to move." This is the same pipeline that runs to Putra Heights, to where the colossal explosion occurred on April 1, 6km or 7km from where we were standing.

The pipeline, which is a section of the Trans Peninsular Gas Utilisation (PGU), cuts across Putra Heights into Shah Alam. While many Putra Heights residents were aware of Petronas' gas markers and caution signages, they did not realise the existence of the main gas pipeline underground, as it had been laid well before the township was built.



MY Say

BY AZAM ARIS

The old spot near the buffer zone ... Abang Mie cooks the lemong over woodfire for many hours. Certainly, it could have posed a danger if there had been a gas leak.



Perhaps, before the incident, no one had ever thought about the possible hazards of a gas pipeline. After the explosion, however, some residents have asked whether the Shah Alam City Council (MBSA) or, for that matter, MBSJ should have taken note of potential threats caused by encroachment into public utilities' buffer zones, or business activities such as the lemong stall that are too close to gas pipelines.

Abang Mie's stall is not like many of the small lemong stalls that mushroom during Raya, where they only warm the bamboo stems. At Abang Mie, they cook the lemong over woodfire for many hours. Certainly, it can pose a danger if there were a gas leak.

The PGU pipeline has many cautionary signs along its route. The section near Abang Mie's old location has one that indicates that it is the reserve area of a high-pressure gas pipeline. It has warnings such as "Do not trespass and encroach", "Do not park light and heavy vehicles", "Do not erect any building structure", "Do not dig or construct embankment works", "Do not engage in farming or raising of livestock", "Do not vandalise the property", "Do not dump rubbish and chemical waste" and "Do not start open fires".

Whose responsibility is it to monitor such activities or encroachment on or near the reserve area? Certainly, Petronas must do the monitoring of its assets but does it have the legal authority to take swift action, including dismantling buildings, or does that fall entirely under the jurisdiction of the city or local councils?

If it is the city council's responsibility, then in the case of Abang Mie's stall — which had been operating for many years, maybe on reserve land or, if not, certainly too near the buffer zone (see photo) — action should have already been taken.

And if it did carry out other activities that had been cautioned against by Petronas, MBSA then has a lot of explaining to do. Its decision to move the stall was right but why did they wait until the April 1 tragedy happened?

And it seems like the encroachment of the PGU buffer zone in Putra Heights is not an isolated case. On April 23, the Kedah government was alerted to encroachments of a section of the Petronas gas pipeline route in Pendang district; the encroachment is believed to have taken place for several years.

Bernama reported state housing, local government and health committee chairman Mansor Zakaria as saying the activity was reported in two villages, where residents had allegedly been extracting red earth from above the pipeline. "The matter was brought to our attention by the district officer," he said. Petronas has been alerted to this matter.

The problem of land encroachment in this country

is not limited to just gas pipelines. Overall, encroaching of buffer zones and reserve land of public utilities is a growing problem. Besides Petronas, power and electricity company Tenaga Nasional Bhd, railway operator KTM Bhd and state water companies also face similar situations.

Encroachment of forest reserves, water catchment reserves and state land are also long-standing problems. In addition, illegal logging and farming of vegetables and fruits, including durian, are quite prevalent.

Whereas these forest reserves and buffer zones are meant to protect critical infrastructure, ensure public safety and preserve the environment, illegal occupation, unauthorised development, weak enforcement, corruption and poor governance have caused many problems.

Although the full investigation into the Putra Heights gas explosion has not been completed, city and local councils, state governments and government-owned public utility companies should not wait but must initiate their own checks with immediate effect to ensure that the integrity of their assets is intact.

Auditing and remapping of various utility routes, notably gas pipelines, water pipelines and the electricity grid at the national level, should be carried out. And an integrated approach, under which all the public utilities can share data on their assets, should be encouraged.

For example, some of the Petronas pipeline routes follow the ones constructed by Tenaga Nasional, Telekom Malaysia or highway operators. These companies can cooperate by jointly monitoring the assets. After all, they are strategic national assets that are crucial to Malaysia's economy, development and stability, and should also be protected against acts of sabotage.

These companies should also invest more in advanced detection systems, drones and routine security audits, as well as work hand in hand with the enforcement teams of city and local councils. They must also always engage with residents as they implement safety measures.

While laws exist, better enforcement, advancement in technology and public cooperation are needed to prevent disasters. Land and asset encroachments and tragedies happen because there is also a lack of enforcement and governance due to corruption.

To handle corruption, the government has to nip the problem in the bud by going after the givers and the takers. There is no two ways about it.

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