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All talk, no action just won't do

WE thank *The Star* for the two-day coverage to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the Highland Towers tragedy on 11 December 1993.

Tun Musa Hitam in his exclusive interview with *The Star* made the remark that "nothing has changed to prevent such tragedies from happening".

This is well supported by the list of major landslides highlighted in your paper since the Highland Towers tragedy.

The Star has rightly pointed out the dangers of cutting down hill slopes for agriculture or development purposes. Trees are generally very effective in stabilising hill slopes by providing a protective cover and also by binding the soil together by their pervading root systems. They also reduce and slow down run-off water from rainfall.

Removal of such tree cover, whether gradual or sudden, can lead not only to excessive run-off but also to siltation of waterways. These result in localised floods after heavy downpours, and are especially noticeable in the Klang Valley, which has experienced very rapid development in the past few decades. The recent tragedy in Cameron Highlands can also be attributed to excessive land clearing and consequent siltation of Tenaga

Nasional Berhad's reservoir and the misguided release of water from it.

Exposed hill slopes, devoid of a forest cover and the associated root network, are much more prone to erosion and landslides. Sadly, despite the repeated tragedies from landslides since the collapse of Block One of Highland Towers, we continue to see the authorities' apathy on hill slope developments.

Local councils continue to grant approvals for development on hill slopes with guidelines which vary in standards for different territories. There should instead be stringent federal laws governing hill slope development that are uniformly applicable for the whole country.

The Federal Court ruling in the Highland Tower legal battle that local councils cannot be held liable for losses suffered should a building collapse has virtually removed the burden of fear of potential punishment for culpable approving authorities. Unless the Federal Government, local authorities and the judiciary are resolute in addressing these weaknesses, we can expect more talk when the next tragedy occurs.

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