

MALAYSIA

'Gunung Jerai floods not an act of God but man-made'

USM water expert blames senseless development, forest-clearing for water column phenomenon

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A water column is a vertical expanse of water stretching between the surface and the floor of a body of water, causing flash floods. – Jalan Jalan Cari Makan Facebook pic, August 20, 2021

BY

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GEORGE TOWN – A water management expert has blamed development for the water column phenomenon at Gunung Jerai in Yan, Kedah, recently.

A water column is a vertical expanse of water stretching between the surface and floor of a body of water, causing flash floods.

As of 6pm yesterday, scores of people remained in evacuation centres as the authorities struggled to clean up the trail of destruction left behind by the water column that had formed atop Gunung Jerai.

Massive gushes of water and sliding earth from the mountain were accompanied by flooding in areas near the foothills on Wednesday. The disaster is believed to have affected 2,000 villagers.

It also left four people dead and two others missing.

Meanwhile, 20 hoteliers were stranded at the resort when an access road was swept away by surging waters.



Forests have a valuable flood-control function in absorbing huge amounts of rainwater, says an expert. – Ceritalahkau Twitter pic, August 20, 2021

Universiti Sains Malaysia's School of Humanities water expert Prof Chan Ngai Weng told The Vibes that the phenomenon is partly due to climate change (extremely heavy rain) and partly due to anthropogenic activities, such as forest-clearing, construction, agriculture and virgin forests developed into built-up areas.

“Forests have a valuable flood-control function in absorbing huge amounts of rainwater.

“For example, during the dry season, almost 90–100% of rainfall is absorbed by forests. During the rainy season, less is absorbed, but 30–70% of rainwater is still absorbed.

“Once the forests are cleared, there is 0% absorption as 100% of the rainwater flows as run-off on the land into rivers. Hence, we have mudflows and flash floods like what happened in Yan yesterday (Wednesday).”

He said climate change cannot be solely blamed for the phenomenon, as humans are also the instigating culprits.

“So, we should look in the mirror and point the finger at ourselves and not blame nature, the weather or God.”

On recommendations to mitigate the issue, Chan said the authorities should stop all forms of forest-clearing and developments in forest reserves.

“They should build check dams, small dams or retention ponds along rivers to divert some of the rainwater. These can be used for recreation or aquaculture.”



Mud coming down from the Singkir subdistrict is an indication that there has been massive development in the area, says SAM. – Bernama pic, August 20, 2021

Chan urged the Kedah government to monitor the situation by deploying drones at forest areas.

“Strict enforcement is required. Heavier fines, including jail terms, should be instituted for those found guilty of forest-clearing in protected areas.

“Sustainable drainage should be mandatory, whereby built-up areas must have 50% permeable areas to allow rainwater to seep underground. This will reduce the amount of run-off.”

Penang exco Zairil Khir Johari said the state government, via its Drainage and Irrigation Department (DID), is working hard on mitigation measures to offset the rise of river water.

“The projects need time to be ready as some (measures) were procured only last year.

“The state government, via the DID, is constantly upgrading waterways (rivers and main drains) throughout the year, especially before rainy seasons, by desilting and removing aquatic plants, rubbish and blockage to ensure water can flow.”

Sahabat Alam Malaysia president Meenakshi Raman told The Vibes that there is a need to investigate mining or quarrying operations that led to parts of the [forest being cleared](#) prior to the incident on Wednesday.

“The videos and pictures we saw are unsettling.

“The mud coming down from the Singkir subdistrict is an indication that there has been massive development in the area. No floodwaters would be mud-coloured if there had been no felling of trees and wanton clearing of land.

“If the area is forested, you would not get ‘teh tarik’ (floodwaters). This is a sign from Mother Nature.” – The Vibes, August 20, 2021

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