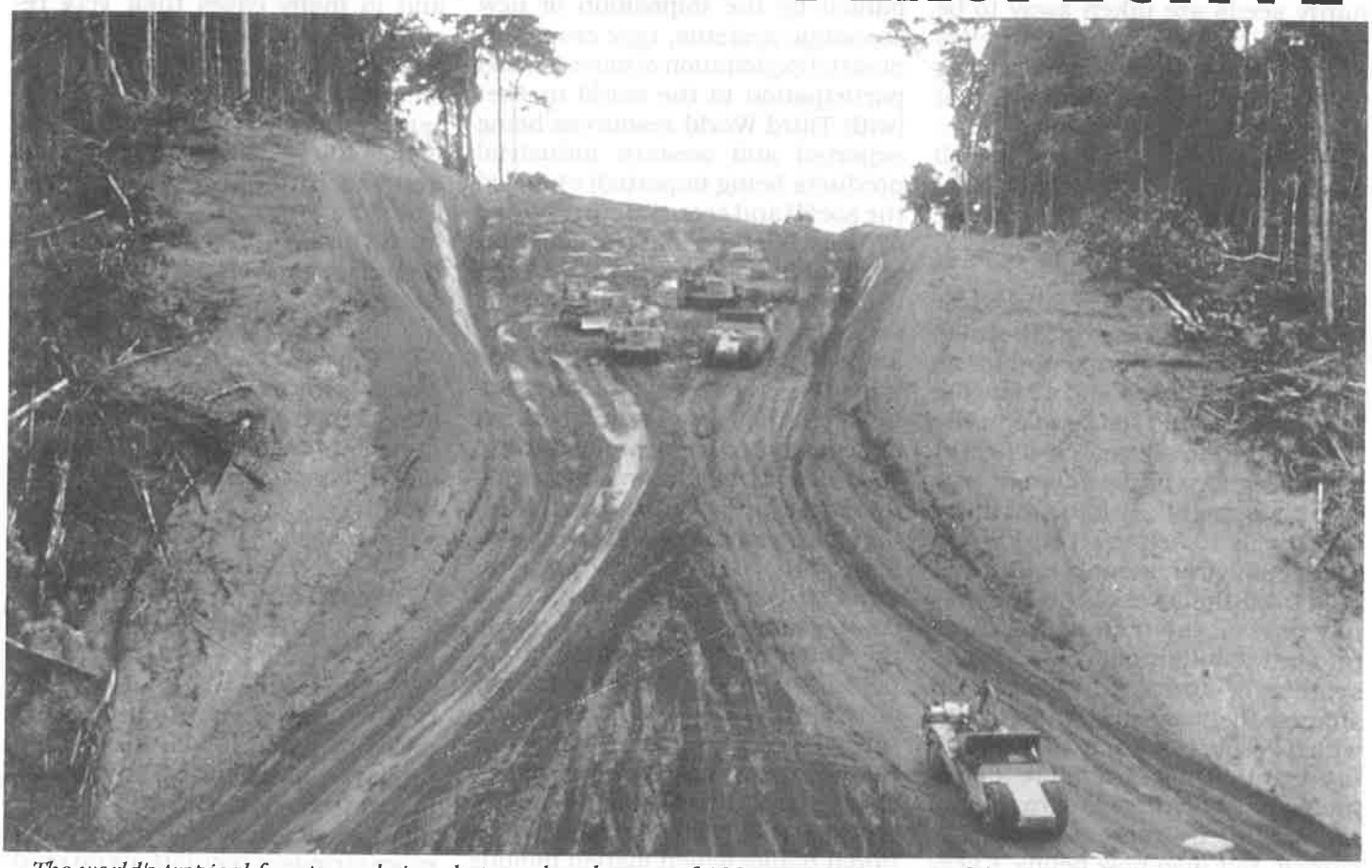
THE GLOBAL ENVIRONMENT CRISIS: A THIRD WORLD PERSPECTIVE



The world's tropical forests are being destroyed at the rate of 100 acres per minute. If this continues, by the turn of the century little primary forest will be left.

by Khor Kok Peng

I. INTRODUCTION

It used to be thought that the environmental crisis was mainly a rich-country phenomenon, a problem caused by affluence and suffered as a luxury by the affluent societies. As conventional belief had it, a country must first 'develop' and industrialise. When it is already industrialised, it will have problems disposing of toxic wastes, keeping pollution levels low and worrying whether the nuclear power station will explode. But in the Third World, such problems don't exist because there is little industry anyway to worry about its side-effects. There, in the remote villages and the unsightly urban slums, 'poverty is the number one environmental problem'. What needs to be done, says this orthodox theory, is for the Third World society to industrialise rapidly. Never mind if there is some pollution, low occupational safety standards, even the displacement of traditional communities; these are the inevitable and necessary side-effects of the larger good goal of providing jobs and modernising the country. Let us worry about the environmental effects of growth when we are already developed and rich. The goal now is growth at all costs.

This theory is fast fading away, even though today it may still hold sway in textbooks and in the minds and policies of politicians of all shades in both rich and poor countries, capitalist and socialist politicians, right wing and left wing and central academics. It is fast fading because the stark realities of everyday life are telling us that despite 'growth at all costs' (and there has been impressive growth of the Gross National Product in many Third World economies), poverty has not vanished, not even diminished, but increased. Moreover, it is the poor people of the Third World who are the main victims of the global environmental crisis, and many millions of new victims are being created year by year. Their resource base is destroyed by chemicals or modern technology, their forest and land is taken away because of 'development projects', their water resources are polluted by industrial wastes, their indigenous skills

and products are rendered useless and irrelevant against the onslaught of modern processes and products. Their rich diversity of trees and plants is turned to desert and sand; their fishery resources are scooped out of existence; their hardy seeds are taken away to be replaced by new hybrid varieties which succumb more and more to bold and bolder pests; and the most pitiable of them themselves succumb to famine, malnutrition, ill health, lack of water, homelessness: the hopeless victims of the global environmental crisis.

There is thus a crucial need for the Third World to analyse the roots of the global environmental crisis as it manifests itself and affects the Third World, and for people in the Third World to advocate a different form of society, and a different type of 'development'. It is also important for us to see the Third World society's environmental problem not only from the level of the community or even the nation, but as an integral component of a global system of industrialism which shapes the way and the rate in which resources are exploited and used and which therefore determines not only how environments are modified, recreated or disrupted, but also how people's very lives are affected.

* * * * * *

II. THIRD WORLD ENVIRONMENTAL PROBLEMS AS PRODUCTS OF THE IMPORTATION OF THE WESTERN SYSTEM

Conquest of the Third World

In Third World societies before colonial rule and the infusion of western systems, people lived in relatively self-sufficient communities planting rice and other staple crops, fished and hunted for other food, and supplied housing, clothing and other needs through small-scale industries which made use of local resources and indigenous skills. The mode of production and style of life were also in harmony with the natural environment.

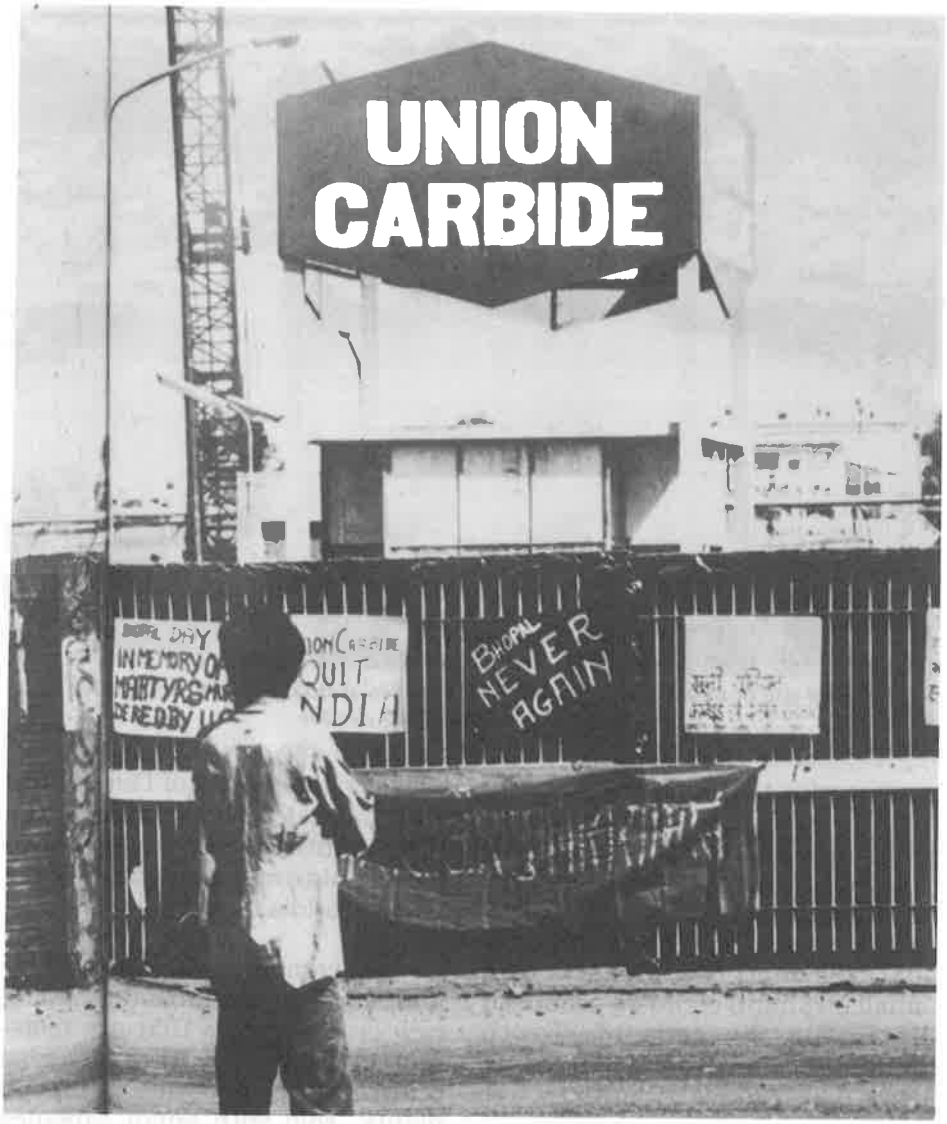
Political colonial rule accompanied by the imposition of new economic systems, new crops, industrial exploitation of minerals and participation in the world market (with Third World resources being exported and western industrial products being imported) changed the social and economic structures of Third World societies. The new structures, consumption styles and technological systems had become so in-built that after the attainment of political independence, the importation of western values, products, technologies and capital not only continued but expanded. Third World countries became more and more tied up with the world trading, financial and investment system, with transnational corporations in the forefront, setting up trading and production bases in the Third World and selling products and technologies to them. They were aided by an entire infrastructure of aid programmes funded by the rich-country governments, by multilateral institutions like the World Bank, and also by transnational banks which loaned billions of dollars to finance expensive projects and the importation of highly capital-intensive technologies. They were also supported by foundations and research institutions and scientists in the rich countries which sponsored and carried out research on new agricultural technologies which would 'modernise' the Third World, in other words create the conditions whereby the Third World would have to depend on the transnational companies for technology and inputs. In order to pay for the import of modern technology and inputs, these Third World countries were forced to export even more goods, mainly the natural resources like timber, oil and other minerals, and export crops which took up a larger and larger portion of total land area. Economically, financially and technologically, Third World countries were sucked deeper and deeper into what has proven to be the whirlpool of the world economic system. In the process the Third World has lost or is in the process of losing its indigenous products, resources and skills. Our peoples are losing their self-reliant capacities, their confidence, and in many cases their very resource base on which survival depends. The world economic and technological systems are themselves facing crises. The Third World is now hitched onto these systems over which they have very little control. The survival and viability of most Third World societies will thus be put to the test in the next few decades.

The rest of this section will briefly give examples of how the importation of the western system has resulted in environmental and health consequences for the Third World.

Import of Hazardous Technologies and Products

With rising awareness in the rich countries about the hazards posed by modern technologies and products, and demands by citizens to control such hazards, governments have introduced more and more stringent regulations on product safety and occupational safety. Litigation taken by victims of such hazards has added pressures onto producers to reduce the risks attached to the production and use of their products. As a result many transnational companies have shifted their production operations to the Third World where safety regulations are either very lax or non-existent. Many industries are also shifting their sales promotion and markets to the Third World where they can sell products of lower quality or products which are outright toxic and are not permitted to be used in the rich countries themselves.

As a result many Third World countries are now exposed to extremely toxic or dangerous technologies which could potentially cause great harm. The Bhopal gas tragedy where 3,000 lives were lost



A gas leak at the Union Carbide pesticide factory in Bhopal, India, killed and maimed thousands. Do we need this kind of development?

and another 200,000 people are suffering disabilities, is the outstanding example of what could happen when a western transnational company adopts industrial safety standards far below acceptable levels in its own country. There are hundreds of other industrial plants of sub-standard sold to the Third World (the Bataan nuclear plant in the Philippines, for example) or shifted there by transnationals to escape health and pollution standards of their home countries.

Hazardous products are also being pushed to the Third World in increasing volume. Examples include pharmaceutical drugs, contraceptive and pesticides banned years ago in European and American countries or in Japan, but sold by companies of these same countries to the Third World; cigarettes containing far higher tar and nicotine content than levels in the rich countries; and, most recently, milk products contaminated with high radioactivity resulting from the Chernobyl nuclear disaster. The health effects on Third World peoples are horrendous. For example, it is estimated that 40,000 people in the Third World die from pesticide poisoning each year. Moreover, millions of babies are also estimated to have died of malnutrition or illness through taking diluted or contaminated commercial milk pushed by transnational companies after their mothers gave up breastfeeding after being persuaded that bottle milk was superior or just as good.

The hazardous technologies and products imported from the rich countries also often displace indigenous technologies and products which may be more appropriate to meet the production and consumption needs of the Third World. Labour-intensive technologies which provide employment for the community and are in harmony with the environment (for instance traditional fishing methods) are replaced with capital-intensive modern technology which in many instances is ecologically destructive. More appropriate products or processes (an outstanding example is breastfeeding) are replaced by modern products which are thrust upon the people through high-powered advertising, sales promotion and pricing policy. The Third World is thus in the process of losing much of its indigenous skills, technologies and products which are unable to stand up to the onslaught of the modern system.

The Green Revolution and Modern Industrialised Agriculture

The imposition and penetration of the western system has also changed the face of Third World agriculture. In many Third World societies, a large part of the lands planted with traditional food crops was converted into cash crops for export under the plantation system.

When export prices are high, the incomes obtained could be higher for export-crop farmers, but when prices fall (as in the present period) the farmers will not be able to buy enough food with their incomes, and many agricultural workers would lose their jobs.

In those areas where farmers still cultivate food crops, the so-called Green Revolution has made a tremendous impact. The Green Revolution is a package programme which facilitates more than one crop per year through the introduction of high-yielding seed varieties,

high doses of chemical fertilisers and pesticides, agricultural machinery and irrigation. In many areas where this modern-package 'revolution' was implemented there was an initial rise in production because more than a single crop could now be produced a year.

But the rise of farmers' incomes was soon reduced by the increasing costs of imported chemical inputs and machinery. The pesticides used also exacted a heavy toll in thousands of poison cases including deaths. And then it is now increasingly found that the high-yielding varieties are very susceptible to pest attack as the pests become resistant to the pesticides. Yields in some areas then began to drop. Meanwhile thousands of indigenous rice varieties that had withstood generations of pest attacks have been wiped out at farm level. Many of these seed varieties are now located only in research laboratories, most of which are controlled by international agencies and rich countries. Third World farmers and governments will increasingly be at the mercy of the transnational food companies and research institutions which have collected and patented the seeds and germplasm originating from the Third World itself.

The use of chemical pesticides has exacted a heavy toll in thousands of poison cases including deaths.

Biotechnology: The Latest Weapon

Biotechnology is fast becoming the newest and most powerful scientific weapon which the rich countries will use to control Third World societies even more.

The new science is being developed by a few transnational companies. Control over biotechnology could give them the power to produce new products that will displace Third World commodities; force Third World producers and consumers to pay billions of dollars in royalties and high prices; place the monopoly of agricultural seeds in the rich countries; and even wage biological warfare against Third World governments.

Biotechnology uses genetic engineering to change the shape of plants, animals, organisms and even people. Scientists could now "play God", rearranging fragments of different species to create new living creatures. For instance a 10,000 pound cow (the size of a small elephant) could be produced by fusing the cells of growth hormone genes from whales, into cows.

Companies producing the new technologies will displace Third World goods. For instance:

- Fructose produced by biotechnology has captured over 10% of the world sugar market, caused the sugar price to fall and thrown tens of thousands of sugar workers in the Third World out of work.
- 70,000 people in Madagascar growing vanilla lost their income when a Texas firm produced natural vanilla beans in biotech labs.
- In 1986, Sudan lost its export market for gum arabic when a New York company discovered a new industrial process for producing natural gum.

It's now estimated that biotechnology can find substitutes for US$14 billion worth of Third World commodities now exported to the rich countries. Such a displacement could dramatically reduce the Third World's income.

Big companies like Ciba-Geigy and Hoechst are now developing new crop varieties that are resistant to pesticides. They are also planning to produce "embryo plants" sold with small capsules containing fertilisers, fungicides and herbicides ready to mix with soil. This is used now for celery, tomato, carrots and green pepper and in future wheat, barley and sorghum. Farmers, including those in the Third World, will be forced to buy the whole kit, at high prices.

Thousands of seed varieties (such as for rice) are now being collected in labs by Shell, Sandoz and other companies. If the new varieties are wiped out by pests (such as in Ethiopia), the poor countries will have to beg for their own traditional seeds back from these companies, for a high price of course.

Biotechnology is also developing new chemical and biological weapons in the US and Russia. For example, the gene which releases the toxin of cobra is being trans-

ferred into E Coli, a bacteria present in human intestines. Similar experiments are producing other deadly pathogens which can cause plague and brain inflammation. Such weapons can be used to deadly effect against Third World countries.

Till now, tampering with inorganic substances has given rise to massive chemical side effects in pesticides, food additives and industrial chemicals. But tampering with living organisms through biotechnology could be even more dangerous. The genetically engineered living products can reproduce, grow and migrate. It would be impossible to control their bad side effects.

Trawl fishing and marine pollution have resulted in dwindling catches for the traditional fishermen.

It is said that biotech could bring many benefits, but also pose new dangers. Unfortunately, the way it's being developed, the benefits will mainly go to the rich countries whilst the Third World will carry the burdens and side effects.

Modern Trawl Fishing Destroys Fishery Resources

In many Third World societies, fish is the main source of animal protein and fishing used to be a major thriving economic activity. In traditional fishing, the nets and traps were simple and ecological principles were adhered to: the mesh size of nets were large enough so as not to trap small fish, the breeding grounds were not disturbed and fish stocks could multiply. Fishing required hard work and tremendous human skill, passed on through generations, and the boats and nets were usually made from local materials, and the whole community was involved in fishing, fish preservation, mending of nets, making of boats, and so on.

Modern trawl fishing was introduced, in many cases as a result of aid programmes provided by rich countries. (In Malaysia, for instance, trawl fishing was introduced through German aid programme). There was an explosive increase in the number of trawlers, usually owned by non-fishing businessmen and operated by wage-earning crew. There was gross overfishing, a lot of the fish caught by trawlers were not meant for human consumption but sold to factories as feedmeal for animals, and so the criterion in trawl fishing was maximum catch in the short-run for maximum present revenue. The mesh size is usually small so that even small fish could be netted and sold, and destructive gear were used which scraped the bottom of the sea-bed and disturbed breeding grounds. As a result, there was a decrease in fish stocks and depletion of fishery resources, and the catch has declined in many parts of the Third World for both traditional and trawl fishermen.

Meanwhile, riverine fishery resources have also been destroyed by toxic effluents from industrial estates housing transnational-owned and local factories which kill off fishlife and also poison villagers' water supplies. In the rice ponds where previously farmers used to catch fresh-water fish to supplement their diet, the pesticides introduced through the Green Revolution have also killed off fishlife. Thus the livelihood of millions of small- scale fishermen in the Third World has been threatened, whilst an important source of protein for the general population is also reduced. In Malaysia, where fish used to be abundant and considered a poor man's meat, marine seafood is now about the most expensive item on restaurant menus because of the depletion of marine life. Access of the poor to fish is now more and more restricted because of decreased quantity and escalating prices on the market.

Forest Resources Logged for the Rich Countries

Another Third World resource fast disappearing is the tropical forest. Traditionally the forests were inhabited by indigenous peoples practising swidden agriculture which, contrary to propaganda from the modern system, was an ecologically sound agricultural system causing minimal soil erosion in the hilly tropical terrain. This system has been threatened by massive logging activities as trees are chopped down by timber companies for log export to the rich countries, or for conversion of primary forest to grazing land for cattle to be slaughtered to cater for the hamburger industry in the United States. Between 1900 and 1965, half the forest area in developing countries was cleared, and since 1965 the destruction of the forest has accelerated even more. Up to 50 million acres are destroyed

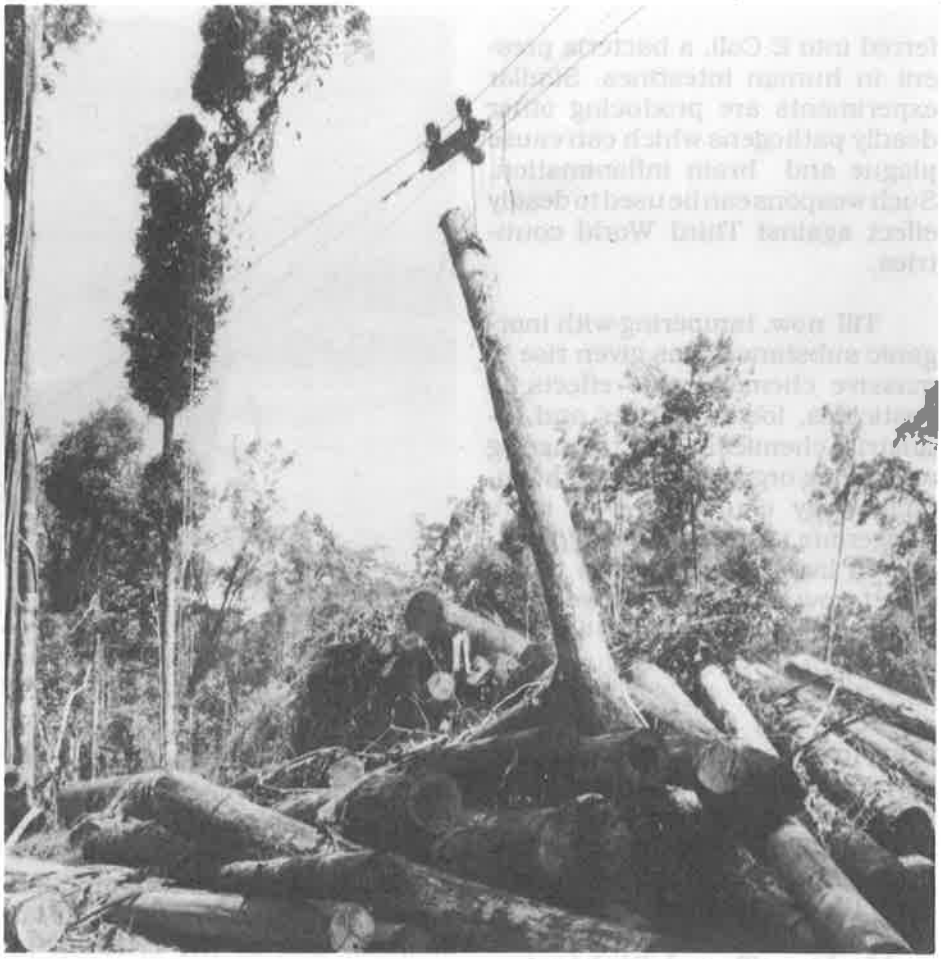
or seriously degraded each year and at the turn of the century little primary forest will be left.

The massive deforestation has multiple ecological and social consequences, including the loss of land rights and way of life (or even life itself) of millions of tribal peoples throughout the Third World, massive soil erosion due to the removal of tree cover, thus causing the loss of invaluable topsoil; much reduced intake of rainwater in catchment areas as the loss of tree cover increases water runoff to rivers; extensive flooding in rural and urban areas caused by excessive silting of river systems; and climatic changes due to increased carbon dioxide in the atmosphere due to the loss of trees. Besides these effects, there is also the loss of biological diversity as plant and animal life in these oldest of earth's forests disappear.

Modern Industrial Plants and Energy Megaprojects

The indigenous small-scale industries of the Third World used to produce simple goods which were required to satisfy the basic needs of the majority of people: processed food, household utensils, footwear and clothes, furniture, simple houses and so on. The technology to manufacture these goods was also simple, and labour-intensive. Many of these indigenous industries have been displaced by the entry of modern products which when heavily promoted through advertising and salesmanship became glamourised and thus rendered the local products unglamourous and low in status in comparison. With the modern products capturing high market shares, modern capital-intensive industries (usually foreign owned) set up base in the Third World to produce them. This displaced the traditional locally-owned industries.

But many Third World countries were not contented simply with modern consumer-goods industries. They also ventured into very expensive heavy industries and

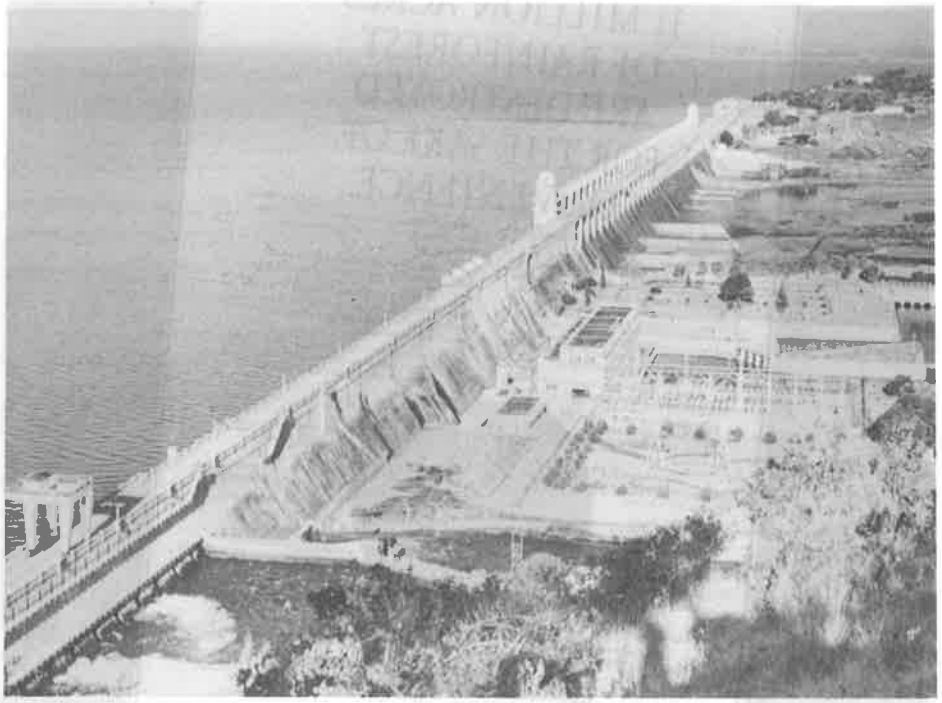


Logging spells long-term ecological destruction. Are the short-term gains from log exports worth it?

industrial projects such as steel mills, cement plants, and large infrastructure projects such as long highways, big bridges and supertall buildings. These are projects and infrastructure copied from the cities of the rich countries. The political leaders of the Third World feel their countries need to have these super projects in order to become 'developed' just like the rich countries.

Unfortunately many of the projects were ill-planned and ill-managed. In some cases there was not the economic base to justify the establishment of the plants or infrastructure, so that the projects became 'white elephants': nice to look at but not serving any useful function. In other cases the imported technologies were inappropriate: for instance a paper and pulp plant became useless when it was found the imported machinery was designed for the processing of temperate-climate wood and not the tropical wood which was abundant in the Third World country. In yet other cases there was not the financial, technical or managerial capacity to maintain the projects as going concerns. In all these cases, the projects ran up large losses and often could not be maintained: some were abandoned, yet the loan taken to finance the projects had still to be serviced for many years.

In order to cater to the huge industrial plants or infrastructure established, huge amounts of energy are required. Thus enter the megaprojects in the energy sector, particularly large hydro-electric dams and nuclear power stations. Each such project has its own problems. The huge dams require the flooding of large tracts of forest, causing the loss of the forest and disruption to the livelihood and way of life of many thousands of people living in the forest. The dams themselves do not have a long lifespan



The Tungabhadra dam in Central India — such megaprojects not only entail billions in terms of financing but also involve the massive displacement of millions and the vast destruction of forests and wild-life.

due to siltation; thus they are usually financially not viable; in other words their costs far outweigh their benefits. There are health effects as ecological changes associated with dams spread schistosomiasis disease (carried by snails) as well as malaria and other ailments. There is of course also the possibility of a major tragedy should the dam burst.

In the case of nuclear power plants there is always the possibility that those plants sold to the Third World may not have the same standard of quality and safety as those installed in rich countries where there is stricter quality control and technical expertise. If the plant installed in a Third World country is found unsafe then the government has a dilemma: stop its operation and incur a huge loss or continue using it but run the risk of a tragic accident. In the Philippines, Westinghouse Corporation built a nuclear plant for US$2.2 billion but there are so many doubts about its safety that the Aquino government has decided to 'mothball' it. Even if initially a nuclear plant is declared safe enough to start operating, there is always a possibility of an accident, besides the difficulty of disposing its radioactive waste.

In all these mega industrial, infrastructural and energy projects, a lot of money is involved, often running to hundreds of millions or billions of US dollars. They are invariably marketed and pushed by industrial and construction related transnational companies who stand to gain huge sums in sales and profits per approved project. They thus used all kinds of persuasions to get governments in the Third World to adopt these projects. Finance is arranged for by the World Bank, other multilateral banks such as the Asian Development Bank, or by transnational commercial banks, or rich-country governments, usually under aid programmes. Such projects are usually inappropriate for genuine development. They end up underutilised, grossly inefficient or too dangerous to use.

Absorbing so much investment funds, they deprive communities of much-needed finance for genuine development projects, and moreover lead the borrowing Third World nations into the external debt trap. Finally, they cause widespread disruption and displacement of poor communities, especially indigenous peoples, who by the tens of thousands have to be 'resettled' as their forests and lands are flooded out by dams.

* * * * * *

III. THE EXPLOITATIVE TRANSFER OF RESOURCES FROM SOUTH TO NORTH

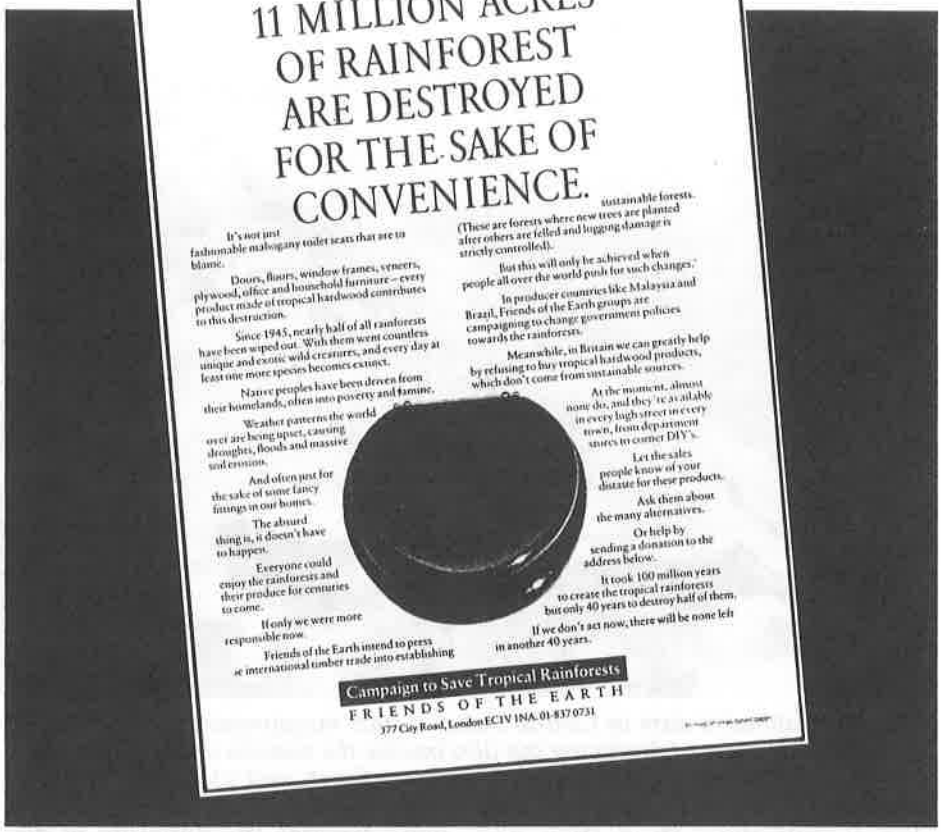
The above examples in the previous section illustrate how the penetration of industrial-nation technologies and projects can reap disastrous consequences on Third World environments and peoples. But this is only part of a long historical process, which now has unfortunately intensified, in which environmental and other resources have been transferred from poor to rich countries. The control of both powerful technological capacity and the systems of world trade and finance has enabled the industrial countries to suck out forest, mineral and metal resources from the Third World, and to make use of its land and labour resources to produce the raw materials that feed into the machinery of industrialism. The rich nations with around a fifth of world population use up four-fifths of world resources, a large portion for making luxury products. The Third World gets to use only 20% of resources. Since incomes are also unequally distributed within Third World nations, a large part of these resources are also used up in making or importing the same high-tech products as are enjoyed in the rich nations, and in importing capital-intensive technologies to produce these elite consumer goods. Thus, only a small portion of world resources flows towards meeting the basic needs of the poor majority in the Third World.

This is the ultimate environmental and social tragedy of our age: the scientific knowledge that could be properly used to provide for every human being's physical needs, is being applied instead

through industrial technology to take away resources from the Third World largely for the production of superfluous goods; whilst the majority of Third World peoples sink deeper at the margins of survival.

Worse yet the very processes of extracting Third World resources result in environmental disasters, such as deforestation, massive soil erosion and desertification, pollution of water supplies, and the horrible human toll in poisoning from toxic substances and in industrial accidents. The resource base on which communities have traditionally relied for both production and home needs, has rapidly been eroded. Soils required for food production become infertile, forests which are home and life for indigenous peoples are logged or flooded out, water from the rivers and wells are clogged up with silt from deforestation or with toxic industrial effluents, and twigs and branches from trees used as energy supply disappear as the whole forest is axed by timber men. In the future, these people will find it more and more difficult to make a living and to live, when resources get more and more completely depleted.

The transfer of resources at global level takes place through many channels. First, there is the transfer of physical resources as logs and metals and oil are shipped from South to North. For example, only 20% of the world's industrial wood comes from tropical forests but more than half of that is exported to the richest nations. The developed countries produce and keep 80% of the world's industrial wood but also import much of the rest of the world's timber harvest as well. Most of it is used for furniture, high-class joinery, housing, packing material, even matchsticks. Thus the wood that is exported to rich countries mainly for luxury use is lost to Third World peoples who now find it difficult to get wood for essential use in making houses, furniture and boats.



A campaign by the Friends of the Earth , UK, to persuade the British public not to buy tropical hardwood products uses the fashionable mahogany toilet seat as a symbol of the wasteful lifestyle in rich countries that leads to rainforest destruction.

Secondly there is a transfer of financial resources in that the prices of Third World commodities (obtained from their environmental resources) are low and declining even more. Between US$60 - 100 billion were lost to Third World countries per year in 1985 and 1986 alone due to the fall in commodity prices. In human terms, this means drastic cuts in living standards, massive retrenchments of workers, and big reductions in government budgets, in many Third World countries.

And thirdly, many of the 'development projects' which lead to the loss of resources are financed by foreign loans. It is rare for these projects to generate sufficient returns to enable repayment of the debts through their own steam. In the end the country loses valuable foreign exchange and income in debt repayment. Moreover the Third World is rendered ever more dependent on the technologies and products of the industrial world, for which substantial amounts have to be paid, for imports, royalties and inflated prices for spare parts, thus further draining away the resources of the Third World. Many Third World countries then sink into the quagmire of the external debt-foreign technology trap.

* * * * * *

IV. FACTORS CAUSING THE ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS

The environmental crisis is global in nature. Therefore, to understand its dynamics and causes, we should analyse it from an international perspective.

In the capitalist industrialised countries, the logic of growth is built into the very economic system itself, as firms compete with one another for the market. They have to sell more in order to lower production costs and survive; those

who do well take over those firms that don't do well. The drive for markets and sales in order to obtain sufficient profits for survival leads to the proliferation of products and thus the increasing use of raw materials, including forest products and products from deforested land in the Third World. Since incomes are unequally distributed within the rich countries, there is a mad scramble by the firms to get the rich and the middle-class to become hooked on 'fashion' and 'status' products, since with their abundant incomes they have already long satisfied basic survival needs. The hire-purchase, credit-card, instalment-credit schemes also enable the not-so-rich in these societies to join in the craze for consumer products. The result is the production and consumption of too many products, many of which are luxurious, merely fashionable or status-satisfying, and many of which are wasted either through underutilisation or through easy and constant disposal (eg. electric toothbrushes for luxury, tropical rosewood furniture for status, fashion clothes for underutilisation due to fashion obsolescence, poor-quality cars or ball-pens for built-in physical obsolescence, and Coca-cola cans and disposable diapers for wasteful products.)

The Third World has been drawn into this system as the providers of raw materials during the colonial period to feed into the hungry jaws of the industrial machines of the colonising countries, and to this day it remains the producer of commodities sold at low prices in exchange for the high-priced manufactured capital and consumer goods imported from these same rich countries. Due to the unequal exchange of traded products and services, the Third World surrenders most of its resources but obtains only a small fraction of the goods and services with which to fulfill the basic survival needs of its people. The Third World has 75% of the world's population but accounts for only 17% of the world's GNP, 15% of world energy consumption, 30% of food grains, 11% of world education spending, 6% of world health expenditure, 8% of world industry and 5% of world science and technology (*New Internationalist 1984 Calendar*). The Third World is thus the loser in the very unequal distribution of wealth and income on a global level, yet by the logic of the very system of capitalist expansion, it continues to chop its forests and plant its crops for export to the rich industrialised countries.

The Ecologist

Scientists have described the rapid destruction of tropical forests as the worst environmental disaster now taking place on earth. More than half has already disappeared; almost all that remains will vanish within a few decades if the destruction goes on unchecked.

The economic motive force of expansion is also accompanied by the increased technological capacity of the system to exploit and deplete resources at incredibly rapid rates. Thus, modern science and technology, perfected to serve the needs of expanding industry, also plays its major role in facilitating the rapid exploitation of resources and the environment.

When technology is used by industry to convert resources into consumer products, the marketing division of the corporation has to get the consumer to do his or her part to buy the final products. Thus the world of advertising and sales promotion creates a consumer culture in which commodities seem to take on an aura and life of their own, and people are drawn to these commodities to give meaning, motivation, status and security to their lives. This culture and way of life, which makes people susceptible to their role of buying the products (however superfluous, wasteful or even dangerous to their health and mental sanity), is part and parcel of the set of factors which eventually lead to forest destruction and resource depletion.

In the centrally planned economies, where the pulsating motive for profits amongst competing firms is less strong, there is nevertheless a relentless logic for physical expansion almost equal or perhaps

Utusan Konsumer

equal to the growth mania of the capitalist countries. It started perhaps as a necessity to develop an industry and armaments capable of defending itself against the rich capitalist countries, but it progressed to a need to challenge these countries, and has degenerated into a desire for industrialism as an end in itself, in the belief that the proliferation of material goods through the development of technology or the 'forces of production' would lead to the attainment of the 'socialist goal'. In this process, the same consumer culture and the desire for the gadgets of 'modern life' (especially those which were created in the capitalist countries) pervade.

Meanwhile, in the Third World itself, the elite and governments of most of the countries have adopted the same growth syndrome, the same attitude of maximising exports, revenues and exploitation of resources for the immediate present, instead of adopting a programme of conservation and allocation of use of resources over the long term. In the Third World, it is understandable that growth be a prime objective of the economy. What is undesirable is the type of growth that is taking place on the foundation of an unequal distribution of resources, wealth and income. This leads to the benefits of growth going mainly to a minority, thus increasing the inequality gap within the Third World country itself, thus burdening the poor majority with inequality within the nation on top of inequality on the international scale. With business and political elite copying the styles of development they see and admire in the industrial countries, growth then takes the form of industries producing relatively luxurious products mainly for an urban elite whose incomes are sustained either by the profits or trading margins of economic sectors which exploit and deplete non-renewable resources (forestry, oil, metals) or export crops. In the public sector, the revenues generated from timber and other exports and the loans obtained from the World Bank or international commercial banks are largely sunk into huge projects which are often economically unviable and environmentally unsound. In many countries, the political and business elite also do not shy away from granting concessions and projects for themselves or their companies or their fellow politicians and friends; or from getting kickbacks, bribes and commissions in exchange for forest concessions; thus we have the spectacle of capital flight to the tune of hundreds of billions of dollars out of the Third World in the past decade. As is now well known, former President Marcos of the Philippines spirited billions of US dollars out of his country. Thus, granting political favours and corruption, and the general close linkage between business and politics, could well account for the reason why timber concessions are given so freely in many Third World countries, even though many warnings of environmental and economic adverse effects of rapid deforestation are given. This personal interest is coupled with the short-term vision of most political leaders (whether in developing or developed countries) to look only a few years ahead (at best), and thus to maximise growth, production and exports in the immediate present. Conservationist policies would transfer the benefits to a future generation, or to a future government, and are thus useless to a politician who wants to maximise his popularity in the present in order to win the next elections.

Thus, the factors which cause

The Asian Rare Earth factory in Bukit Merah, Malaysia. The Bukit Merah residents have taken court action to try and stop the factory operations. The community has a high incidence of leukaemias and miscarriages which they blame on the wastes.

forest and resource depletion are the motive force of economic expansion, technological capacity, cultural induction, greed and the 'growth-today' syndrome in the Third World, and the political systems which put a premium on the immediate present instead of long-term sustainable development.

V. TOWARDS A NEW ENVIRONMENTAL ORDER

Given the prevailing ideology of modernisation and growth, environmental concepts and groups in many Third World countries are met with skepticism and even anger. They are often called 'romantics' or crackpots who love blue skies and butterflies. In some Third World countries they are denounced as selfish groups who want to preserve nature and thus deprive poor people of land; or they are called lackeys of western environmental groups who want to keep the Third World poor by stopping their economic growth; or they may even be termed subversive because of 'anti-development activities'.

But the growth of environmental consciousness and action will emerge even more and grow rapidly in many parts of the Third World, simply because it is now becoming so obvious that environmental degradation and increasing poverty go hand in hand. Environmental issues are no longer a 'luxury' but matters of life and death in the Third World.

In Brazil and other South American countries, several effective Indian organisations (backed by environmental groups) have organised to defend the rights of indigenous peoples in relation to their forests and land rights. They have also formed a regional-level grouping COICA (Coordinating Body for the Indigenous Peoples' Organisations of the Amazon Basin) to more effectively represent their position. In India, dozens of grassroots-based groups have sprung up, including the Chipko Movement to save trees, the groups fighting for the rights of Bhopal victims, the movement against Narmada Dam and other dams and anti-nuclear initiatives. In Thailand, the environmental groups' efforts against deforestation succeeded in getting the government to impose a national logging ban in 1989. In the Philippines, there is a rapidly growing Green Alliance of ecology-minded NGOs. In Sarawak (Malaysia) thousands of native peoples have blockaded timber roads to prevent the transport of logs out of their forests. Other Malaysian communities are also battling against toxic wastes in their vicinity, or the invasion of trawler boats into their fishing grounds.

These community-level actions are crucial to the development of 'Green Consciousness' at the grass roots of the Third World. However, a deeper understanding of environmental problems in the Third World would have to link them to the global dimension of the economic, social and political system. It is unacceptable to preach to the Third World to adopt appropriate technologies or preserve simple lifestyles, whilst people in rich nations continue to destroy the world's resources in producing luxuries with capital-intensive technologies. Third World resource and environmental problems are the result of participation in a world system in which Third World countries are dependent components, whose resources are used or sucked away by the industrial and trading houses of the rich world. Thus, the world's environmental problems are interlinked, but the roots lie in the rich countries which as first priority have to cut down on their high consumption levels in order to reduce their overbloated use of world resources. The system of industrialism itself, its economy, technology, and culture, has to be dismantled, in both the capitalist and socialist North.

There must thus be a radical reshaping of the international economic and financial order so that economic power, wealth and income is more equitably distributed, so that the Developed World will be forced to cut down on its irrationally high consumption levels. If this is done, the level of industrial technology will also be scaled down. There will be no need for the tremendous wastage of energy, raw materials and resources which now go towards production of superfluous goods simply to keep

'effective demand' pumping and the monstrous economic machine going. If appropriate technology is appropriate for the Third World, it is even more essential as a substitute for the environmentally and socially obsolete high-technology in the Developed World.

But it is almost impossible to hope that the Developed World will do this voluntarily. It will have to be forced to do so, either by a new unity of the Third World in the spirit of Opec in the 1970s and early 1980s, or by an economic or physical collapse of the system.

In the Third World, there should also be a redistribution of wealth, resources and income, so that farmers have their own land to till and thus do not have to look for employment in timber camps or on transnational company estates. This will enable a redistribution of priorities away from luxury-oriented industries and projects towards the production of basic goods and services. With the poor given more resources, there would be an increasing effective demand for the production of such basic goods and services. With people given the basic facilities to fend for themselves, at least in terms of food crop production, housing and health facilities, Third World governments can reduce their countries' dependence on the world market to sell their resources.

Thus there can be a progressive reduction in the unecological exploitation of resources. With increasing self-reliance based on income redistribution and the growth of indigenous agriculture and industry, the Third World can also afford to be tough with transnationals: it should insist that those invited adhere to health and safety standards that now prevail in the industrial countries. It can reject the kind of products, technologies, industries and projects which are inappropriate for need-oriented and ecological development.

In development planning, the principle of 'sustainable development' should be adopted: the sparing use of non-renewable resources and also their optimal use, the development of alternative renewable resources, whilst all the time devising technologies, practices and products that are durable, safe and satisfy real needs, so as to minimise wastage.

In searching for the new environmental and social order we should also realise that it is in the Third World that the new ecologically sound future of the world can be born. In many parts of the Third World and within each Third World nation there are still large areas of ecologically sound economic and living systems, which have been lost in the Developed World. We need to recognise and identify these areas and rediscover the technological and cultural wisdoms of our indigenous systems of agriculture, industry, shelter, water and sanitation, medicine and culture.

We do not mean here the unquestioning acceptance of everything traditional in the over-romantic belief of a past golden age which has to be returned to in all aspects. For instance, exploitative feudal or slave social systems also made life more difficult in the past. But many indigenous technologies, skills and processes are still part and parcel of life in the Third World which are appropriate for sustainable development and harmonious with nature and the community. These indigenous scientific systems have to be accorded their proper recognition, encouraged, upgraded if necessary, but they have to be saved from being swallowed up by the 'modern system'.

Third World governments and peoples in the other world have to first reject their obsession with modern technologies which absorb a bigger and bigger share of surplus and investment funds, in projects like giant hydro-dams, nuclear plants and heavy industries which serve luxury needs, we must turn away from the obsession with modern gadgets and products which were created by the rich countries to mop up their excess capacity and their need to fill up Effective Demand.

We need to devise and fight for the adoption of appropriate, ecologically sound and socially equitable policies to fulfil needs such as water, health, food, education and information. We need appropriate technologies and even more so the correct prioritising of what types of consumer products to produce. We can't accept 'appropriate technology' producing inappropriate products. What we need are appropriate products produced by appropriate technologies. Products and technologies which are safe to handle and use, durable, fulfil basic and human needs, and which do not degrade or deplete the natural environment and resources. And perhaps the most difficult aspect of the fight is the need to de-brainwash the people in the Third World from the cultural penetration of our societies, so that life-styles, personal motivations and status structures can be delinked from the system of industrialism, its advertising industry and creation of culture.

And so the creation and establishment of a new economic and social order which is based on environmentally sound principles to fulfil the human rights and needs of people is not such an easy task. It is not an easy task at all, as we know too well. It may even be an impossible task, a challenge which those who take it may find frustrating at times, a challenge which cynics and even the good-hearted in their quiet moments may feel will end in defeat. Nevertheless it is the greatest challenge in the world today, for it is tackling the issue of the survival of the human race and of the Earth itself. It is thus a challenge which we in the Third World readily accept and we hope that together with our friends in the developed countries we will grow in strength to pursue the challenge for as long as required, to build the many paths towards a just and sustainable social and environmental order.

Published by The Consumers' Association of Penang, 87 Cantonment Road, 10250 Penang, Malaysia.
Printed by Jutaprint, 54 Kajang Road, 10150 Penang.