

## Taking Over The Lead



**Y.** Bhg. Dato' Engr. Hj. Ahmad Husaini bin Sulaiman took over as the Director General of the Department of Irrigation and Drainage Malaysia (DID) from his predecessor Y. Bhg. Dato' Paduka Engr. Hj. Keizrul bin Abdullah on 17 December 2007. In an interview with *Jurutera*, he showed that he was more than ready to lead the department and face the challenges that come with the position.

Describing his mixed feelings over the promotion, Y. Bhg. Dato' Ahmad Husaini said, 'This is something that I have wanted to achieve all these years and it has now become a reality. It was always a dream that I had, but I never thought I would achieve it. It is a very good feeling as I never expected my dream to come true.'

He added, 'Now that I am already here, I have to deal with the responsibilities of the position. The challenge is huge and the expectations are very high. I will have to make full use of my position to implement the ideas I have for the department.'

Dato' Ahmad Husaini also feels the weight of burden in leading a department that is responsible for dealing with the drainage system in the country. The DID is responsible for managing the water resources in the country including dealing with the frequent flood problems, management of the river systems, as well as ensuring that the water quality of the rivers is at its highest standards. Here he shares some of his thoughts.

### Curriculum Vitae

Perak born Y. Bhg. Dato' Ahmad Husaini spent his early teen years at the Clifford Secondary School in Kuala Kangsar. After completing Form Five, he was offered a scholarship to pursue a degree in Civil Engineering at the Loughborough University in the United Kingdom. Having completed his degree, he joined the DID, which was then known as Jabatan Parit dan Taliair (JPT), in 1978 as a government scholar.

In 1986, he decided to further his studies and obtained his Masters in Irrigation Engineering from the Catholic University of Leuven in Belgium. Upon his return, Y. Bhg. Dato' Ahmad Husaini was posted to the Integrated Agriculture Development Project of Besut in Terengganu, also known as KETARA. His career path also took him to Melaka where he was the state director of the department for three years; as the deputy director of DID Selangor for six years and as the department's deputy director in Johor from 1996-1999.

He then joined the National Hydraulic Research Institute of Malaysia (NAHRIM) for about three years before he was promoted to become the project engineer of the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) development in the drainage department for about two years. In 2003, he was posted to Negeri Sembilan as director of the department. He was then asked to return to the department's headquarters in Selangor three years later.

### What is the status of the country's water resources?

Although the department is going in the right direction, there is still a lot more to be done as far as the issue of water resources is concerned. We are also trying to push for a wider acceptance of the Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM). We hope that Malaysia can emulate what other developed countries have done. In Europe, the United States and Australia, this concept is widely accepted and practised.

However, our main priority now is to solve the problem of floods in the country. We have to look at the necessary action that we can take to solve the flooding problem especially in flood prone areas like Johor and

Pahang. The seasonal flood in the month of December and January in the east coast, especially in Kelantan and Terengganu, is also an issue we have to resolve.

Under the 9th Malaysia Plan (9MP), the department has received an allocation of about RM4.2 billion for flood mitigation. This shows that the government is very serious about solving the problem of floods in the country. To begin resolving these problems, we must first look at how best to manage it. In the early stages, our approach for dealing with flood problems was flood defence. This means that, whenever a flood occurs, we try to do something to stop the flood from occurring.

However, the situation is now totally different. We have come to realise that we cannot stop natural disasters. These are events created by nature and there is nothing we can do to prevent it. Instead, what is more important is to manage these situations as best we can. The more appropriate strategy to deal with the flood problems is via flood management. In fact, in other countries such as in the United States or the Netherlands, this is a widely accepted strategy.

By adopting this strategy, it does not mean that we will no longer experience any flood. This outcome is definitely not possible. There will be times when the public will have to accept that flood can and will still occur. Although structural measures are being implemented in flood prone areas, these measures cannot guarantee that floods will not occur.

Flood management measures are meant to ensure that subsequent floods will not be as severe as before. This is the idea that the public must understand and learn to accept. When floods do occur, the water must be allowed to spread out and drain away. This is an unavoidable situation because all of the flood prone areas are located on flood plains.

Even when we build bunds by the river, there will be a limit to how high these bunds can be. In countries like the Netherlands, water from the river is allowed to overflow the bank and flood certain areas, even in inhabited areas. This is the kind of concept that we have to adopt.

### What is the progress on the river rehabilitation programme?

Back in 2001, the DID had launched the One State One River Programme. Within this programme, one river in every state is selected for monitoring and assessment purposes. Our target is to increase the quality of the water in each river to Category 2, with Category 5 being the most polluted and Category 1 being drinking water quality.

By the end of the programme, the expected outcome is for a river in each state to be free from rubbish, ensuring that the capacity of the river is adequate and to reduce flood problems. We have a mechanism which will allow us to determine and measure the effectiveness of the programme and we hope to be able to achieve all that by 2010. To sustain these results in the long term, however, there is a need to create a greater awareness among the public. Although the programme is not progressing as fast as we would like it to be, we have observed that some of the rivers have shown improvement in terms of water quality.

To avoid further pollution to the rivers, direct discharge into the river will not be allowed. Waste water from industrial areas and farms will have to be treated first before it can be discharged into the river. These are some of the measures that we are taking. However, for these measures to be effective, the programme needs cooperation from many sectors. The DID is not able to do it on its own as some of the measures that need to be implemented falls beyond its jurisdiction.

#### One State One River Programme

State	River
Perlis	Sungai Perlis
Kedah	Sungai Petani
Pulau Pinang	Sungai Pinang
Perak	Sungai Kinta
Selangor	Sungai Penchala
Negeri Sembilan	Sungai Temiang
Melaka	Sungai Melaka
Johor	Sungai Skudai
Pahang	Sungai Galing
Terengganu	Sungai Hiliran
Kelantan	Sungai Pengkalan Chepa
Sarawak	Sungai Miri
Sabah	Sungai Papar

The One State One River Programme is rather extensive. For it to achieve its goals, each state has to play their part to carry out the programme accordingly. Implementing this programme is not an easy task as it involves people from many sectors including other government agencies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) as well as the public. They all have to play their part to ensure the success of the programme. By getting everybody involved, we are trying to solve the problem at source.

### What other projects are the DID focusing on?

In June 1998, the Stormwater Management Manual (MASMA) was introduced to manage the flow of storm water in urban areas. We are trying to sell the concept of controlling the runoff at source through the construction of detention and retention ponds to property developers. It is very important to make them understand the importance of this system.

Uncontrolled development of roads and solid pavements increases discharge into the river as it prevents rainwater from seeping into the ground. One of the objectives of MASMA is to encourage new property development projects to incorporate a drainage or infiltration system to reduce additional discharge into the river. Although we cannot stop development, we must have a system that will stop rainwater from going straight into concrete drains to avoid overloading the drainage system.

At the moment, not everybody believes the system to be effective. I do not know why this is so. Perhaps they believe that it is expensive to incorporate such a system into their development. However, according to our calculations and in some of the areas that we have used as a pilot project, the increase in cost is not very significant.

I must point out that it may be more expensive for a developer to build an open drainage system, and more so if the development area is far away from the river. Although the best option is for the developer to build the system within his development project, this option is not always feasible. Many developers fail to understand that the cost of implementing the system is low. So far, only a minority of developers are convinced with this concept. The majority of them, regardless

of the size of their property developments, have yet to be convinced.

We are trying to convince more developers to adopt the system. In fact, some state governments have done very well in encouraging the adoption of the concept. Selangor is a good example of the system being used in some of the new development areas. Negeri Sembilan and even Pulau Pinang have shown some good improvements by having retention ponds built.

Although the adoption process is slow, I believe the public will accept the idea more readily once they see the importance of the system. I would certainly like the system to be made mandatory for all new developments. However, at the moment, it will remain a guideline for the local authorities and developers.

### What is the outlook for the department?

For the next few months, we hope to complete as many flood mitigation projects as possible. We have about 500 ongoing projects at the moment. While some of the bigger projects will only be completed next year, most of the smaller projects can be completed by the end of this year.

We are working hard to settle as many projects as we can before the next storm comes. This will be a very challenging task. In fact, I have been telling my officers that we should aim to finish some of the flood mitigation projects by the end of September so that we will be ready for the rainy season in the month of November, December and January.

Overall, however, we have a vision of becoming a world class organisation by 2010. This vision was initially mooted by Dato' Paduka Engr. Keizrul. I thought it was a very good idea and wanted to make sure that it does not remain an impossible dream. The department is working very hard to achieve that vision.

We have done our study planning, recognise all our weaknesses and the gaps that needs to be filled for the vision to become a reality. Achieving this goal will require teamwork by the whole organisation. Fortunately, we are getting good cooperation from the staff members who are trying very hard to fulfil this vision, and we are very excited about it. ■