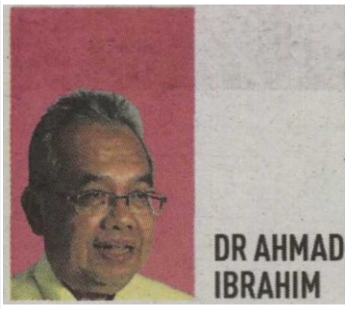
REDUCING POLLUTION

CHINA GETTING RID OF ENVIRONMENTAL POLLUTER TAG

Nation's plan to reduce greenhouse gas emissions includes implementing carbon trading



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FEW would disagree that China is among the largest drivers of the world economy.

In fact, in a few years, it will be just that — the leading driver of the global economy. It is easy to understand why. With a population approaching 1.5 billion, Chinese consumers are already a major force in the world consumption economy.

And, as the Chinese middle class grows, which it will in the coming years, United States consumers will soon pale in comparison with the Chinese. Already, global tourism is dominated by big-spending tourists from China.

In many tourist spots around the world, you are bound to bump into them. It is estimated that about 100 million Chinese travel the world every year. Many tourist spots have included Mandarin as an additional language in their communication kits.

In Malaysia, we are aiming for just one million of that this year.

In the rush for development, China went into high gear soon after embracing the market economy in the early 1990s. The support infrastructure that the country desperately needed was built at breakneck speed. The construction of roads and highways linking cities and the ports did not take long. It was easy because every decision came from the one central authority.

The same was true for the country's venture into manufacturing. The modernisation of factories largely operated by state-owned enterprises also happened very fast. Everything happened so fast that regard for the environment was largely ignored.

This soon proved devastating for the nation. The air became quickly polluted by the emissions of pollutants, particularly particulates. Many rivers and waterways got caught up in water pollution, especially as a result of industrial waste water from factories mostly built in a hurry in the name of development. It was definitely unsustainable.

One such environmentally damaging example, which received worldwide publicity, was the havoc created when rare earth mining in China went out of control. Independent miners ignored environmental guidelines. The result was a massive water pollution problem that attracted negative publicity on rare earth production worldwide.

Even in Malaysia, the Lynas rare earth operation was unfairly judged largely because of horror stories from China. Now, after five years, all the concerns have been proven to be unfounded and baseless.

As China progressed, the issue of environmental neglect was used by other countries to discredit China at international meetings. The meetings that had hurt China the most were climate conferences where calls were made for China to be included in the list of countries that should observe emission targets.

In the early days of the agreement, the list only applied to more developed countries, such as the US, European Union and Japan. So much so that some developed countries have called for the clause on "common but differentiated" term to be deleted from the agreement on climate mitigating actions.

The deletion would mean the list of countries to observe emission targets would be expanded to include developing nations as well. As expected, such a call was vehemently objected by developing nations.

This is because, in terms of per capita emission of greenhouse gas, the levels recorded by developing countries are much lower.

Notwithstanding, China has taken the decision to act on its greenhouse gas levels. It has implemented a master plan that aims to continuously reduce emissions. Furthermore, China suffers a lot from smog and air pollution caused by poor environmental practices.

We hear of dangerous air pollution indices in the nation's major cities, especially Beijing. Apart from the deployment of cleaner production systems in factories, China has also embarked on a programme to phase out coal in its power generation systems. But more than that, China has recently implemented carbon trading as the other instrument to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

This is now implemented in seven provinces. Carbon trading is something that even the developed West struggles to put in place. And China has paved the way, which goes to show that China is now taking environmental matters seriously.

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People wearing masks at Tiananmen Square in Beijing. Carbon trading is something that even the developed West struggles to put in place, but China is paving the way. AFP PIC