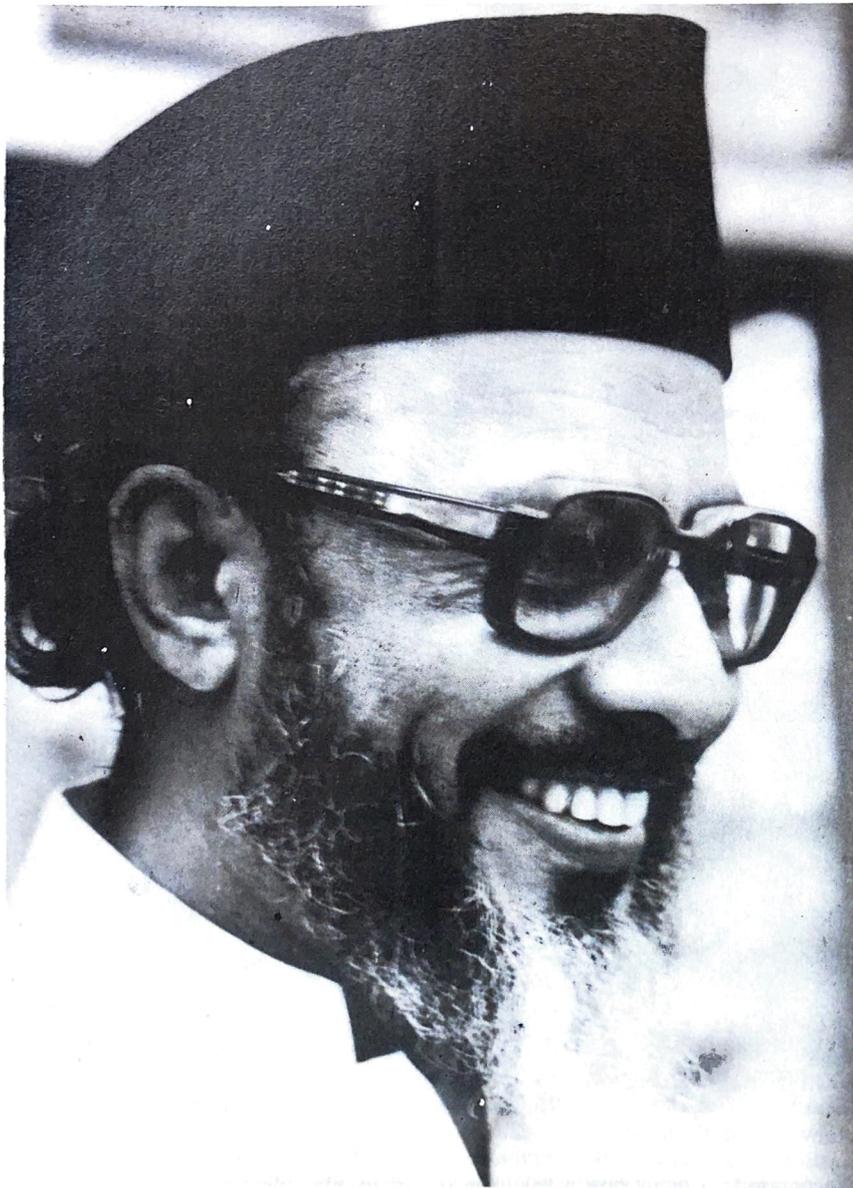


Fighting the Environmental Blight



CAP President, Mohammad Idris, with some of his output

Tragedies like the Bhopal Union Carbide Plant gas leak only highlight the continuing series of less visible environmental disasters which are now gripping most parts of the Third World. Often, governments cut corners in their bid to industrialise rapidly, with the people given little chance of a comeback until disaster actually strikes. The Consumer Association of Penang (CAP) and its sister organisation, Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM), provide one of the rare instances of successful campaigning against the onslaught of industrialisation and its aftermath. **M Iqbal Asaria** reports on how they do it.

A NEW jargon-phrase amongst environmentalists in the West is *full-cost pricing*. This term is meant to reflect the fact that product pricing in market economies is grossly inadequate. In particular, *costs*, like pollution, health hazards and in general effects on the 'quality' and safety of life, are not reflected in the product price. It is reckoned that if full-cost pricing were to be implemented, the whole way of life of industrialised countries would change.

While this kind of radical change does not happen overnight, many pressure groups have flourished to take up several visible issues and force the governments and corporations involved to change track. Some products have been banned altogether and some technologies restricted. However, most hazardous technologies and products have been shifted to Third World countries gripped with the fervour of industrialisation. Controls in these countries are lax, the bureaucracy inefficient and easily corruptible and, more importantly, the lack of effective consumer and environmental pressure groups means that the people have no way of stopping the rot until it is too late.

The problems created by this shift to 'cheap' labour and more amenable environs are now well documented. Dumping of industrial waste, in particular of toxic chemical and radio-active waste, very primitive safety standards in the sighting and maintenance of hazardous industrial plants, marketing of products - including medicines - which are banned in industrialised countries, disregard for the environment - for example on questions like deforestation - in order to accommodate multinational corporations and their activities, and a host of other issues from food additives to baby milk, feature in the wide range of problems created as a result of this shift to areas where even the beginnings of full-cost pricing have yet to be realised.

There are agencies, mainly under the auspices of the United Nations, which try to take a global view of these matters and influence opinion. Their effectiveness, however, is limited, and their impact minimal without support from active and vibrant local organisations. And most local organisations, if government-backed, are too docile. If they are not affiliated - the Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) - then they lack the resources to build and sustain a popular base. In many countries the problem is compounded by dictatorial regimes operating under the direct

tutelage of multinational corporations. Working against all these odds, one finds the Consumer Association of Penang. From small beginnings in the early 70s, CAP has grown into perhaps the most powerful non-governmental consumer organisation in the Third World. Under the dynamic leadership of Syed Mohammed Idris, an Indian Muslim merchant, the organisation has now grown into one with about 50 staff working full-time. The basic function of CAP is seen as educating the public on consumer issues. To achieve this, the Association issues numerous press releases, publishes a weekly newspaper column, issues a monthly newspaper - *Utusan Consumer* - with a circulation of 30,000 and utilises every opportunity to get media coverage.

The issues taken up by the Association cover a wide range and have included the effects of industrialisation on fishing and forestry; the whole area of additives in food products; nicotine levels in cigarettes; sale of drugs banned in other countries; effects of dumping of industrial waste; environmental effects of building dams, bridges and causeways etc.

The key to the Association's success in projecting these issues to the public is the professionalism of its approach. Complaints are taken seriously and competent researchers are allocated to investigate them. The findings are presented cogently and disseminated through as many media channels as available. The forceful personality of S M Idris, or 'Uncle Idris' as he is widely known in Malaysia, was instrumental in opening up many channels, but the thoroughness of the Association's work has attracted some very intelligent and dedicated staff to work full-time, and a country-wide coterie of supporters prepared to do their bit to spread the message.

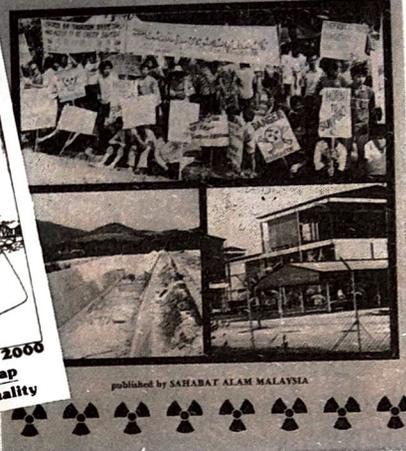
Among the staff there are some outstanding Malaysian intellectuals, like Martin Khor, an economist of considerable repute. There are also some very bright young lawyers ploughing through the mountain of legal documentation to identify and utilise channels for putting the state bureaucracy on the defensive.

Uncle Idris never does things by half. Once CAP was off the ground, it started initiating seminars on various issues, like intermediate technology, the environment, the legal system vis-a-vis the environment and the latest one held in November 1984 on the Third World developmental crisis. These seminars have had the effect of giving more publicity to the Associa-



DEATH ON THE Malayawata gas

PAPAN RADIOACTIVE WASTE DUMP CONTROVERSY



tion, as well as bringing together international groups and personalities working in similar areas to exchange ideas and coordinate strategies.

The stage has been reached whereby CAP seminars and publications are difficult for the government to ignore. No sooner a report on a particular activity has been released than pressure begins to build up on the bureaucracy to take it up and set the record straight.

With this level of credibility, the Association has now launched into a wider programme of investigating the whole process of development, with particular regard to the Malaysian experiment. The nature of the country's industrialisation programme, the methods used to finance it, the costs involved in terms of environmental degradation and the effect on the quality of life, have all been examined in the publications of CAP, its research affiliate - *Institute Masyarakat Berhad* - and its sister organisation, *Sahabat Alam Malaysia* (SAM). Indeed, after the announcement of government programmes like the annual budget, CAP is invariably called upon by the media to put the consumers' case.

To widen the catchment area, Uncle Idris also pioneered the formation of SAM, (Friends of the Earth Malaysia). At its inaugural meeting in November 1977, S M Idris said, "SAM was formed out of the anxiety felt by

many concerned people regarding the deteriorating state of our Malaysian environment. We believe that a good environment is a fundamental prerequisite for social and economic development, and indeed for human survival. In recent years, it has become increasingly clear that the rapid depletion of non-renewable resources and the worsening pollution of our water, land and air is threatening the very viability of the current way of life and the very existence of man."

SAM has also taken up the task with the same vigour. It publishes numerous studies on environmental issues and also issues a bi-monthly publication, *Suara SAM*.

The Consumer Association of Penang declines to accept public money and has no political affiliation. Funds come from membership fees, sale of publications, sympathisers and from conferences and symposia from other consumer and environmental organisations. This gives it an independence which is essential to carry on the task it has set itself.

The experience of CAP and SAM in Malaysia illustrate that the genuine concern for the 'quality' of life can be mobilised if a dedicated and serious effort is made over a number of years. Once awakened, it is very difficult for governments and multinational business to disregard the interests of the people. For Malaysia, CAP seems to have achieved this remarkable feat. ■