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Changing tak to win the drug war

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MALAYSIA declared war on drugs in 1983. Thirty-three years later, drugs are still the country's No. 1 enemy.

Instead of seeing the scourge reduced, it has escalated, with the number of addicts and trafficking cases hardly declining.

Children as young as 7 have been found to be hooked on drugs after they were given free drug-laced sweets.

When the children became addicted, they were not only made to pay for the drugs but also turned into pushers to prey on other children.

National Anti-Drug Agency (AADK) records show that more and more schoolchildren in primary and secondary schools as well as institutions of higher learning are abusing drugs.

According to statistics from AADK's National Drug Information System, between January 2010 and February this year, there were 131,841 registered drug addicts here. Of the total, 127,797 were men and 4,044 women.

During the period, about three-quarters or 93,044 drug addicts were aged between 20 and 39, the most productive age in any nation and family.

The statistics revealed that last year, 41 per cent or 1,973 of 4,838 drug abusers who were in treatment returned to their habit.

The actual number of drug addicts are said to be four times greater as most of them cannot be detected by the authorities and addicts do not seek treatment.

Malaysia has laws to deal with illegal drugs that carry heavy penalties, such as the mandatory death sentence, but drug trafficking and abuse continue unabated.

The mandatory death sentence for those convicted of drug trafficking is provided under Section 39B of the Dangerous Drugs Act 1952 but it fails to deter drug traffickers.

What could have gone wrong? Does Malaysia need an overhaul of its policies, laws and programmes regarding substance abuse and drug trafficking?

It is apparent that the drug problem is alarming, especially judging from raids and drug seizures made by the authorities over the years and now almost on a weekly basis.

This year has been declared as a year to wage war against drugs. To do this, we have to ensure the involvement and commitment from society. The war on drugs must begin from the home, supported by schools, workplaces and communities.

At home, parents must monitor their children and educate them to stay away from drugs. In schools, teachers must intervene if they no-

tice that their students are involved in or using illegal substances. Drug prevention education in schools must also be intensified.

At the workplace, drug abuse by workers is considered as an occupational safety and health issue. Workers who are on drugs, such as machine operators, bus drivers and lorry drivers, can be harmful to themselves or others as they may cause injury or death at their workplaces or while commuting to work.

We need greater engagement from the public in the battle against drugs. Community-based associations must implement more community-based programmes to create awareness about the dangers of drug addiction and the consequences of drug trade and trafficking.

Enforcement must be strengthened. Police, Customs and AADK must coordinate their drug-eradication efforts and act with integrity. I would like to congratulate the police and Customs for busting drug-trafficking syndicates. AADK must also be recognised for its cure, care and rehabilitation efforts.

But more needs to be done as victory in the war against drugs is nowhere in sight.

Beefing up the criminal justice system is important in the fight against drugs. There is an urgent need to set up a court dedicated to hearing drug cases. Normal courts take a long time to hear and adjudicate drug cases, proving the maxim "justice delayed is justice denied".

The government has spent hundreds of millions of ringgit to tackle the drug menace but the problem is far from being eradicated.

The government must have the political will in the war on drugs.

Enforcement taken to bust drug rings and weaken the supply chain must be implemented with efforts to eliminate the demand for drugs.

All of us have a responsibility to save the nation, especially the younger generation, from the scourge of drugs.

It is time we stop treating drug addicts like criminals but instead view them as persons in need of medical treatment. This way, the social stigma will be removed and drug addicts will seek treatment for their addiction.

As for reformed addicts, society has to remove the stigma attached to them while providing them with jobs. Employers should place more trust in them, and family members should mix with them rather than isolate them.

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