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Dealing with plastic waste pollution across borders

POLLUTION is often associated with industrialisation. As economies industrialise, the wastes generated by industries pose problems for the environment. Some can be downright hazardous.

What has become clear over the years is that wastes from industries do not just create problems at source. These wastes often transcend borders, causing transboundary pollution. Acid rain is one example. Canada at one time was at the receiving end of the acid forming sulphur dioxide from coal-fired power plants in the United States. Acid rain is now less of an issue, thanks to the deployment of the scrubbing technology.

Dealing with acid rain is not so complicated since the pollution originates from a point source. It would be more problematic if the pollution comes from a non-point source. The haze, for example, which has been a menace in our region, comes from a non-point source. It is the result of open burning activities, mostly in neighbouring Indonesia. This is not easy to deal with since the slash-and-burn culture has become almost a tradition.

The haze from the forest fires in Australia is different, however. While it also comes from a non-point source, it is not deliberate burning. Climate activists blame climate change for the increasing regularity of such natural forest fires not only in Australia but also in many other parts of the world, including California.

The carbon pollution, which gives



rise to climate change, is also transboundary, since the pollutants (greenhouse gases) move across borders. In the case of carbon pollution, it involves both a non-point and point source. The point sources can include industrial plants, cars and other oil-fired transport vehicles. The non-point sources would include forest fires and livestock farms. Livestock is now being blamed for the increasing emission of methane, a greenhouse gas which is 21 times more potent than carbon dioxide.

Finding solutions to climate change is even more complex because it also involves political resolve and the commitment of powerful businesses, not to mention convincing the political sceptics.

This explains why reaching international consensus to rein in climate change has been challenging.

Now, the world has to come to grips with another cross-border pollution – plastic wastes especially from single-use plastic. Some refer to such wastes as a consequence of the throwaway culture of the disposable era.

The world is now realising that there is a massive cost to the convenience lifestyle. In terms of polluting the environment, such single-use plastic have proven to be a bigger menace than other forms of pollution.

There is now evidence that the plastic pollution has even infiltrated the food chain. Scientists have uncovered how microplastics generated from plastics wastes have been ingested by marine fishes that might eventually end as food on our dining table.

Beaches all over the world are being contaminated with the accu-

mulation of plastic wastes. In fact, massive islands of plastic wastes have even formed in the ocean.

There is no denying that finding solutions to transboundary pollution calls for a combination of legal and regulatory measures as well as technology.

A group at the Academy of Sciences Malaysia is now actively deliberating legislative measures for the transboundary haze that continue to plague the region.

Dealing with transboundary plastic pollution requires more than just legislation and regulation, however. This is because the processing of plastic wastes also presents a business opportunity. This is the dilemma. How do we reduce plastic pollution while building a business around plastic wastes?

The answer lies, I believe, in the proper regulation of the international trade in such wastes. Recently, countries in the West have been exporting such wastes to this region after China stopped taking them. And they come without proper specification and certification of their quality.

If recycling is to be adopted as a way out of the plastic waste problem, then there must be proper trade rules with the provision for arbitration, as is the practice in other types of international trade. A well-regulated trade would create value for such wastes.

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