

CORPORATED MANAGEMENT / HUMAN RESOURCES

PAPER: NEW STRAITS TIMES (NEWS)

DATE: 15 JULY 2013

PAGE: 02

Prioritise human safety ahead of development

AHEAD of a trip to France last month to take delivery of Firefly's new aircraft — the ATR 72-600 turbo-propeller jet — FlyFirefly Sdn Bhd's chief executive officer Ignatius Ong drove home the message on the importance of aviation safety.

He stressed that an airline's reputation hinges on its ability to carry passengers safely and also maintain its fleet of planes well.

Ong, like his predecessor Datuk Eddy Leong, has been known to waste no time in firing or taking stern action against crew members who have been found placing the lives of passengers and colleagues on any flight in jeopardy.

Just like its parent company Malaysia Airlines, Firefly adheres to a very strict safety protocol, and is proud to declare that it never cuts corners when it comes to safety.

This policy and attitude found at Firefly, which started as a community airline over five years ago, is reassuring at a time when air disasters overseas have been making the headlines.

Closer to home, another type of disaster, the collapse of a ramp on

the second Penang Bridge, where one life was lost, does not inspire public confidence in an infrastructure that is meant to serve as a transportation link for millions of commuters between Penang island and Seberang Prai.

Compounding matters is the fact that investigations by the Department of Occupational Health and Safety on the collapse of the ramp are reported to have indicated "shortcomings" by the contractor, allegedly pointing at negligence.

What does it take for corporations to sit up and take issues like public safety more seriously?

Last week in Penang, the company, which owns a piece of land on Bukit Relau and which cleared its hilltop without a permit, was fined RM30,000 by the Sessions Court.

Judge Khairul Anuar Abdul Halim said the court will not tolerate such acts that go against the law and are detrimental to the environment.

Citing the Highland Towers and Bukit Antarabangsa landslide tragedies, he said similar incidents should not be allowed to happen in

Penang simply because landowners failed to comply with regulations.

He said failure of the landowner, General Accomplishment Sdn Bhd, to seek a written permit from the Penang Island Municipal Council (MPPP) before starting earthworks showed its arrogance.

Public interest groups, members of the legal fraternity and politicians have reacted to the quantum of fine imposed, and to the fact that it is the company (or a shell) that is being "punished", rather than an individual or the directors of the company.

The fact that RM30,000 had been imposed as fine has not escaped the attention of many people, who wonder how the fine compares against a proposed development on the said land, which may be carrying a gross development value of hundreds of millions of ringgit.

As this is not the first time that companies have gotten away very lightly for doing harm to the environment or historic structures, the question being asked is: How serious are the local authorities in making developers pay for their acts of destruction in Penang?

Many valuable and historic landmarks in Penang have been lost, like the 100-year-old Asdang House (Metropole Hotel) in Jalan Sultan Ahmad Shah, which was originally designated a heritage building by the MPPP.

The building was reportedly declassified from Category 1 to 2, which means it could be torn down as long as the facade was maintained.

One Christmas day two decades ago, the building was quietly torn down and reduced to rubble.

The company that owned the property was charged in court for demolishing a heritage house without prior permission and fined RM50,000.

Twenty years and several other unauthorised demolitions later — with relatively small fines paid — nothing appears to have changed.

Disregard by corporations for the environment and the communities does not appear to be serious enough for the local authorities to quickly take pre-emptive measures to save Penang's built and natural heritage.

Reactive statements and what appears to be damage-control measures are seen to be the order of the day, as accidents wait to happen island-wide, threatening lives and destroying properties, due to multiple breaches of law by developers.

The onus now lies on the state government — on whether the safety of residents is above the projects of the developers — the next time an application is forwarded for hill land to be re-zoned for development of housing projects.

Although the aviation industry and property sector may not have much in common, the thread linking the two is that they are both responsible for the safety of many human lives.

Those involved must be watched closely and not allowed, at any time, to place lives in jeopardy.



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