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Advance storm warning can save lives

New Straits Times, Malaysia



TYPHOON THREAT

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THE current “flood-of-the-century” could not be averted but some of the losses, especially human lives, could have been avoided if the Malaysian Meteorological Department (MetMalaysia, formerly known as MMD) had set up a proper cyclone (that is, tropical storm) warning system.

Since 1998, I have been proposing that a storm warning system be put in place to specifically deal with cyclones that directly threatened the country.

The first cyclone to strike the peninsula was Typhoon Vamei in December 2001. It made its landfall in Desaru just 12 hours after it first appeared.

This historic typhoon broke the record by becoming the nearest typhoon to develop near the Equator and the fastest cyclone to achieve typhoon strength.

Malaysians, in general, and Johoreans, in particular, were unaware they were struck by a full blown cyclone as it raged across the state causing widespread floods and landslides, which killed several people on Gunung Pulai.

The second cyclone, Tropical Depression (TD) 29W, struck Penang in November 2017. This weak cyclone entered the peninsula from the east coast and slowly passed over the northern states.

Unfortunately, due to the presence of Typhoon Damrey off Vietnam, which pushed the winds strongly eastwards, TD 29W (2017) stopped over Penang island instead of moving steadily west towards Sumatra in Indonesia.

The stationary cyclone gained strength from the warm waters of the

straits and developed a much stronger cyclone over Penang which resulted in severe flooding, landslides and several deaths.

In both events, MetMalaysia failed to give advance notice to the public about the cyclones on its website. In the case of Vamei, there was no warning even after it made a landfall.

In fact, MetMalaysia and the Science, Technology and Innovation Ministry did not admit the existence of the typhoon for several years until a local academic mentioned it in a climate conference in 2005.

As for TD 29W (2017), MetMalaysia also did not mention its presence on its website as it pounded Penang. Rather, it reported on the presence of Damrey. MetMalaysia only reported the presence of TD 29W (2017) when the Penang government appealed

for help.

The cyclone, also known as TD 29W (2019), that caused devastating floods last week was only notified by MetMalaysia when it made its landfall in Kuantan on Dec 17.

This weak cyclone would not have caused major floods if it had continued on its track towards Sumatra. However, just like TD 29W (2017) that struck Penang, TD 29W (2019) unexpectedly stopped in its tracks off the coast of Selangor, probably due to the strong pulling effects of Typhoon Rai in the Philippines.

Instead of dissipating its strength, it hovered over the warm waters of the straits and this enabled it to strengthen and drop the moisture it collected as a continuous heavy rain during that time.

Since TD 29W (2019) developed

from a much bigger cyclone in size compared with Vamei or TD 29W (2017), the effect of the cyclone covered a much bigger area with Selangor being the hardest hit due to its close proximity to the cyclone core.

MetMalaysia could have given the government and public at least three days advance warning about TD 29W (2019) had it implemented a credible cyclone warning system since the formation of the cyclone could be seen on satellite pictures as swirls of clouds on Dec 15.

It is better to give advance warning and the cyclone failed to materialise than to give no advance warning and the cyclone causes untold deaths and material losses.

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SUMMARIES

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