Dramatic turn to water woes

There must be an end to the water crisis in Selangor before taps run dry.

The nearly five-year tussle over the water issue in Selangor between the Pakatan Rakyat government under Tan Sri Khalid Ibrahim and Syarikat Bekalan Air Selangor (Syabas) has taken a dramatic turn which, if not resolved, will affect the five million users in the state.

On Thursday, a Cabinet committee headed by Deputy Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin decided to hold the water conflict and find an amicable solution.

The committee's agenda includes nine ministers but since it is without a state government representation, Selangor has rejected the committee, saying nothing good can come out of it.

The water crisis, which has been simmering since 2009, became a full-blown confrontation when Syabas said last week that water rationing is imminent because all 34 treatment plants are "struggling".

Water disruptions have been an ongoing matter in the state but Syabas' announcement that only one of its 16 treatment plants is working at full capacity went too far, according to the state government.

Syabas had blamed the state government for not doubling its capital expenditure and development, claiming that the state had also objected to a Rm3.8 billion Pahang-Selangor water transfer project and the long overdue Langat 2 treatment plant.

The state government, which wants to transfer water from Kenyir dam instead, responded to Syabas' ultimatum by giving one of its own—a notice to the federal government in a letter dramatically delivered by five state executive members, of its intention to take over water management in Selangor.

"Claiming that it is a "manufactured water crisis", the state got its MPs, state assemblymen and councillors to condemn Syabas for its "imagined" water problem," said Syabas chief operating officer Datuk Lee Muang Kooi.

"We have sent nearly 50 proposals and follow-up letters to the state government on the increasing water usage to control a water crisis but to no avail."

If the state government had seen these notices or agreed to negotiate, they could have averted a water crisis.

It has refused to see that state-owned enterprises like the former Jabatan Bekalan Air Selangor are long gone and replaced by private enterprises like Syabas which are efficient because they are profit-oriented.

The best way forward to protect public interest and keep water tariffs at a manageable level is to allow private enterprises like Syabas to function, he said. But, he said, Parliament has already done it by passing the Water Services Industry Act.

A combination of political navvies, irresponsibility and hapless counter-measures are behind the water crisis in Selangor, and the Federal Government now has to work overtime to unravel the mess before more taps run dry.

Analysis

Bekalan Air Selangor (Syabas) has no experience or expertise in the water industry. Syabas' board of directors are all lawyers and Syabas' headquarters is a 14-storey building that is used as office space.

When Syabas said it was considering rationing water last week, it was a complete surprise to the public, including the state government.

No one expected Syabas to say that it was going to ration water because it was a complete contradiction to what it had been saying for years, that there would be no water crisis in Selangor.

The state government has already taken over water management from Syabas, and the Cabinet committee will be monitoring the situation closely.

The state government has also asked Syabas to provide a detailed explanation of its water rationing plan, including how much water will be rationed and for how long.

The water crisis in Selangor is expected to get worse in the coming months due to the hot weather and increased demand for water.