

KUALA LUMPUR -- Though the price of crude petroleum is yet to breach the US\$100 per barrel benchmark, the upward trend in the last few weeks has created panic among investors and leading fuel consumers. And Malaysians are no exception, what more when there are indications that they will have to bear the brunt next year when the government further reduces the fuel subsidy.

As for Prof Datuk Dr Zaini Ujang, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia's (UTM) Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research and Innovation), the record prices are a blessing in disguise as they provide the opportunity for the mankind to think of ways to reduce our dependence on fossil fuel, natural gas and coal. He told Bernama that it is most pertinent now for the community and industry to utilise energy more efficiently and enhance efforts to identify alternative energy sources.

ALTERNATIVE ENERGY

The initiative to identify alternative energy sources in fact began as early as the 1970s following the petroleum crisis arising from tensions between the Arab world and the United States. Back then, research and innovation on alternative energy sources were the order of the day, worldwide. This resulted in the proliferation of nuclear energy and hydroelectric energy. Nevertheless, according to Prof Zaini, alternative energy sources like bio-mass, wind, solar and hydrogen is yet to see universal acceptance though they have been effectively developed from the scientific and technological viewpoint. He also feels that the energy policies in many of the nations are not conducive enough for an all-embracing utilisation of alternative energy resources.

"The infrastructure for the widespread utilisation of other energy sources are still not available to consumers, especially for alternatives like hydrogen and bio-diesel. In the context of gas powered vehicles in Malaysia, how many petrol pumps with gas filling facilities are there and why are these being monopolised by one company only?" he asked, providing an example.

SEEKING A WINNING STRATEGY

Soaring prices and limited fossil fuel resources for the future call for the authorities to work out a practical strategy. Prof Zaini, an environmental engineering expert, proposed three steps that are to be implemented immediately, involving all levels of the society, to be monitored more effectively by the Energy Commission.

Firstly, the existing policy on fuel subsidy should be reviewed so that it can be implemented selectively using the 'triple bottom line' method, taking into consideration the economic, social and environmental factors.

Secondly, the demand for fuel should be sustainably managed through cost cutting activities, enhancing efficiency and providing incentives to encourage investments toward reducing bulk usage of fuel.

Thirdly, by intensify efforts to identify new energy sources that can be used by all. Among the new energy resources that is cheap and holds good potential but have yet to be fully utilised are biomass and solar power. Presently, preference for both are limited," said Prof Zaini.

MEMORANDUM FROM FOMCA

Meanwhile, the Federation of Malaysian Consumers Association (FOMCA) said it had recently sent a memorandum to the government on energy usage.

According to S. Piarapakaran, FOMCA's Environment Desk Programme Manager, the memorandum outlined several long-term strategies to ensure consumers would not be burdened in future.

Among others, the government should re-examine all policies related to energy in order to work out an integrated policy. Such a policy should incorporate fuel from renewable and non-renewable sources, efficient management and usage of fuel source in all sectors, alternative fuel widely used in transportation sector and breaking the monopoly in energy market by creating choices for consumers.

OTHER

SUGGESTIONS
FOMCA, said Piarapakaran, also recommend that consumers be continuously educated on issues pertaining to energy and fuel.
Through education, consumers can be inculcated to make environmentally friendly choices in purchasing eco-friendly goods.
In its memorandum handed over to the government on Sept 20, FOMCA also stressed the need to develop solar energy to help reduce the dependence on electricity supplied by utility companies like Tenaga Nasional Berhad.
According to Piarapakaran, FOMCA is of the opinion that a dual system can be developed in stages to maximize the usage of solar energy in homes.
FOMCA also suggested that incentives be given to industries that develop solar energy in Malaysia.
In addition, FOMCA also urged that initiatives at developing alternative fuels like biomass, bio-fuel and ethanol be stepped up.
In developing these alternatives, monopoly must be avoided so that consumers are not burdened by a lack of choice in suppliers.

SUSTAINABLE LIFESTYLE THE BEST OPTION
In working out a strategy and formulating a policy, the rise in fuel prices also calls for the public to be more prudent in using energy.
Maybe consumers here can take heed of the sustainable lifestyle of the Swedes as observed by Prof Zaini himself during his visit to the Nordic nation recently.
"In conserving energy within buildings, be it the office or home, energy saving light bulbs and mirrors are widely used. The mirrors reflect light and brighten up the interior."
"Further, windows and curtains are designed to take advantage of natural sunlight. Windows and curtains are easy to be drawn open or close. They are kept open when it is hot and closed whenever it is cold. Thus, air-conditioning and heaters are no longer needed," explained Prof Zaini.
To brighten up the interior, the Swedes prefer light tone colours for their decor.
"That is why furniture giants like IKEA has not only won the hearts of the Swedes but also those of people throughout the world," he added.

PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION
Prof Zaini pointed out that the highly efficient and comprehensive public transportation system in Sweden compels people to use it.
As an example, he said that people who want to go to the Stockholm Trade Centre can only do so by either using public transportation, cycling or walking.
The same thing goes for campuses, cities and recreational centres.
Prof Zaini noted that fuel usage in Sweden is very low not only because of the highly efficient public transportation system but also because of the sustainable lifestyle.
Cycling and walking are not just confined to nature lovers, leaders, intellectuals and commoners also regularly do so without losing self-esteem.
"In Sweden, the sustainable mind is slowly developed within the society through various formal and informal activities that create awareness on the significance of an environmentally friendly attitude."
"Leading a sustainable lifestyle means that all thoughts, actions and ideals are environmentally friendly. Within the context of Swedish society, those who don't lead a sustainable lifestyle are seen as strange, peculiar and a threat to public order," explained Prof Zaini.

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