

NEWS

Cities and malls usher in 2019 on a high note >4



EVENT

Cosplay icons wow fans at Supa Comic >6



SPORT

Football tourney in remembrance of a friend >11

Under the radar

An illegal sand-washing operation ordered closed two years ago is furtively back in business behind hoardings and foliage on the Sungai Klang riverbank. > 2&3

Star Exclusive



Sneaky activities: An aerial view of the sand-washing operation near 5th Mile off Jalan Kelang Lama found to be active again after two years. An excavator is also seen encroaching into the riverbank. — FAIHAN GHANI/The Star



**Star
Exclusive**

An aerial image showing the illegal sand washing activity and river encroachment at the 5th Mile, off Jalan Kelang Lama. — Photos: AZMAN GHANI, YAP CHEE HONG and FAIHAN GHANI

By **BAVANI M**
bavanim@thestar.com.my

Sand pirates back in action

Culprits resume operation two years after expose, hampering government's billion-ringgit river rehabilitation efforts again

THEY are back! Operators of an illegal sand washing site are back in action two years after the activity in Jalan Kelang Lama was exposed and shut down by Kuala Lumpur City Hall (DBKL) following public complaints.

The operation has kicked off again but this time, extra effort has been put into camouflaging the illegal business.

A reader who followed *StarMetro's* exclusive report on May, 2016, titled "Dirty riverside business", said the sand washing activity resumed along Sungai Klang's riverbank which faced the 5th Mile off Jalan Kelang Lama.

This is approximately 8km away from where billions of ringgit is being spent on the River of Life project (RoL) at Masjid Jamek.

The matter was also brought to the attention of Kepong MP Lim Lip Eng's special assistant Sean Oon, who lives 10 minutes away from the operation site.

Attempts by Oon to visit the site to get first-hand evidence proved futile as businesses nearby were not cooperative in helping him obtain information.

Besides hoardings surrounding the project site, mounds of sand, huge trees and foliage along the perimeters help block off the operation from public view.

The use of a camera drone gave a better idea of what was going on at the riverbank.

Oon, a former Petaling Jaya City (MBPJ) councillor, also managed to gain access via a carpark nearby and saw excavators scooping and dumping sand into tipper lorries.

Also noticeable were a makeshift office and sleeping quarters at the site.

Images of a crude sand washing machine and excavators dumping debris into Sungai Klang, however, were captured with drone camera.

Aerial photographs showed a discharge of murky substance from the site which flowed through a



Oon (left) went to the ground to investigate the matter and saw tipper lorries transporting sand from the river.

crude piping system directly into the river.

But the most disturbing image was the sight of an excavator encroaching into the riverbank and digging sand.

This act is prohibited by the Drainage and Irrigation Department (DID).

River encroachment

"This is bad," was the immediate response from Global Environment Centre's (GEC) river care programme coordinator Dr K. Kalithasan when he saw the drone images.

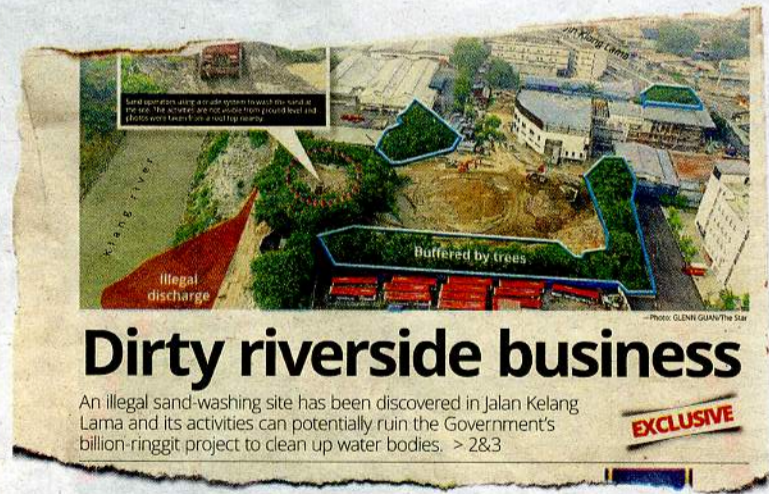
"There is encroachment along the riverbank and there is no buffer.

"The excavator should not be there at all," said Dr Kalithasan, adding that the location of the sand washing activity was in the heart of the RoL project and within proximity of the Sungai Kerayong, the nearest tributary in the vicinity.

"There are two water quality sampling stations operated by the Department of Environment (DoE) and DID just 2km downstream to monitor water quality, so this (sand washing operation) should not be happening."

Dr Kalithasan said the illegal activity was hampering the Government's billion-ringgit river cleaning and rehabilitation operations under the RoL.

Sand washing, he said, was one of the culprits causing river



The *StarMetro* report on the issue in May 2016.

pollution. "These people were shut down before so how can this be, and it is all happening under a new Government," he lamented.

A reader of *StarMetro* who only identified himself as Lim said he noticed excavators and tipper lorries working at the site while dining on the 23rd floor of a nearby hotel.

"I had my binoculars with me, and I was actually looking out for birds when I saw the excavators working near the riverbank. "I knew something was amiss," said Lim, adding that he read about the illegal sand washing activity two years ago.

StarMetro also spoke to workers at a nearby furniture showroom. They confirmed that the operation

resumed over a year ago. "It started some time back," said a staff member there, adding that officers from the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur Land and Mines Office (PTG) even came by to snap photos.

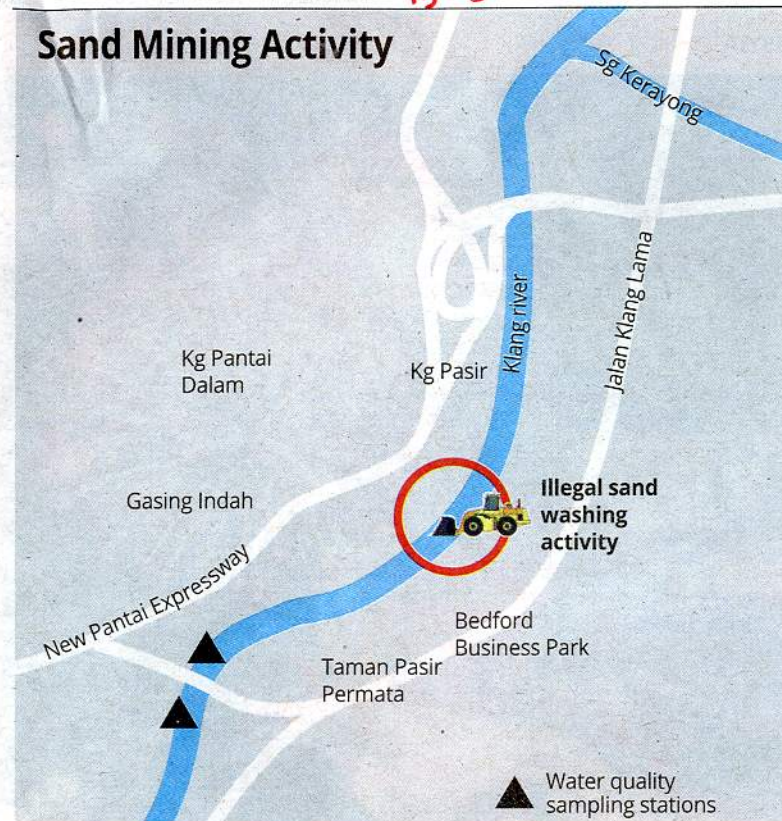
Repeat offender

"Alamak, (they) started again!" This was the response of DID director-general Datuk Dr Md Nasir Md Noh when informed of the operation.

Md Nasir then instructed the Federal Territories of Kuala Lumpur DID director Nishad Mohamed Mohd Shaffy to investigate.

When contacted, Nishad said the operation was illegal and that they

Sand Mining Activity



were dealing with a repeat offender.

"I have notified the Federal Territories of Kuala Lumpur PTG director Sharez Izuan Md Zaidi, who promised to send a team to check the site," he said.

In *StarMetro's* 2016 report, it was stated that the area where sand washing was spotted is a private land.

Excavators and lorries were transporting sand using an inner route along the riverbank to avoid being detected.

When their cover was blown in 2016, the then Kuala Lumpur mayor Tan Sri Mohd Amin Nordin Abd Aziz ordered the site to be shut down.

The project did not have the necessary permits from DBKL, PTG and other relevant agencies.

The culprits managed to dodge the authorities for years as they hid their operations behind huge trees and hoardings.

A meeting was then chaired by the Federal Territories Ministry with multiple agencies to discuss the matter.

Last October, Water, Land and Natural Resources Minister Dr Xavier Jayakumar, Federal Territories Minister Khalid Abdul Samad and Kuala Lumpur mayor Datuk Nor Hisham Ahmad Dahlan,

visited the Lembangan Sungai Klang in conjunction with World River Day.

Dr Xavier said his ministry's toughest challenge was ensuring that the rivers were pollution-free.

Khalid said the Government would continue keeping the rivers clean but called upon the community to lend a helping hand to stop pollution.

Oon, however, added that government agencies like PTG, DBKL and DID must also do their part to carry out coordinated enforcement to stop illegal sand washing activities from polluting the river.

"If numerous complaints have been made to the authorities, and if PTG is aware of the activity as reported by residents, then why is there no action taken?" Oon asked.

Dr Kalithasan agreed with Oon, adding that there must be political will to stop the rot as river-cleaning efforts upstream were going to waste downstream.

He added that water was Class 1 and drinkable upstream of the river at Klang Gates dam.

"As the water flows downstream; the quality changes to Class II. At this point, it needs to be treated before it can be consumed," he said.

Dr Kalithasan said the river then flowed past MRR2 and Zoo Negara,



At ground level, one cannot see anything as the illegal sand washing site is blocked by hoardings and trees.

and as it entered the Ampang township, the quality dropped to Class III.

As it went further down into Kuala Lumpur city centre, the quality was between Class III and Class IV; indicating that the water was not even safe to touch.

"However, the real impact is hard to tell. If there is contamination along the way, water quality may further erode downstream," he said.

"PTG has a crucial role to play here to save Kuala Lumpur's rivers: No matter how much advice DID provides, when it comes to land matters, only the state is in control and it is up to the land office to do something about it," he added.

Meanwhile, *StarMetro's* attempts to get information from the PTG proved futile as numerous emails and text messages went unanswered.



Dr Kalithasan says the illegal activity is hampering the Government's billion-ringgit river cleaning and rehab operations under the River of Life project.