

Headline	It's their future		
MediaTitle	The Star		
Date	04 Jun 2019	Color	Full Color
Section	StarTwo	Circulation	175,986
Page No	9	Readership	527,958
Language	English	ArticleSize	997 cm ²
Journalist	CLARISSA CHUNG	AdValue	RM 50,175
Frequency	Daily	PR Value	RM 150,525



Growing global movement: Students in Britain, Hong Kong, India, and Mexico at Friday For Future strikes calling for urgent action against climate change. — Agencies

By CLARISSA CHUNG
star2@thestar.com.my

IN March, Aroe Ajoeni, 20, organised her first climate change demonstration near a trash-filled walkway along the Klang River in Kuala Lumpur.

Every Friday in the previous month, the university student had been making it a point to go on strike to call for urgent action on environmental policies.

Her strikes, part of the global Fridays For Future movement started by Swedish teenager Greta Thunberg, soon attracted the attention of fellow youth environmental activists.

Following her example, youths from different institutions of learning – as well as some working young people – banded together for the first Fridays For Future climate strike rally in Malaysia.

The turnout was relatively low that first time: only 38 young people showed up compared with the hundreds or even thousands of youths who rallied in cities such as Berlin, Hong Kong and New Delhi.

However, the small seed of change that was sown on that day in March has since taken root in Malaysia.

Just a few months down the road, Aroe says a lot had changed since the first gathering.

"From the 38 people who attended that rally, I gathered more contacts and connected with people with more experience in these rallies and they recruited more people to join the movement," she says.

The next climate rally that took place on April 21 outside the Sogo shopping complex in KL saw about 100 people gathering for the cause.

Aroe says the group – now calling itself Klima Action Malaysia (Kamy) – has no plans to slow down.

"We are approaching the government, we are writing memoranda, organising rallies. We are planning to do a series of workshops and training for people as well," she says.

Kamy is part of a massive youth-led movement that is taking place around the world to get governments to act – and to act fast after the failure of long drawn out diplomatic negotiations that only led to watered down documents like the Paris Agreement (which even then still fail to stick) on environmental issues such as climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution and waste.

On May 24, organisers estimated that 1.6 million students from 125 countries took part in the Fridays For Future climate strike.

This is all taking place just as the results of a new study have been released by the National Academy of Sciences, a research nonprofit in the United States, that indicate sea levels might rise by 2m and displace millions of people if current carbon emissions are not checked.

"This comes on top of the United Nations'

It's their future

Ahead of World Environment Day tomorrow, we speak to the people with the biggest stake in dealing with climate change – the youth.



Malaysian students at a Friday rally in Kuala Lumpur. — AZHAR MAHFOF/The Star

Intergovernmental Science Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services' warning of "unprecedented" and "accelerating" decline in global biodiversity, with over a million species of plants and animals at risk of extinction.

While youths like 16-year-old Thunberg – who has been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, by the way – have been accused of, among others, impatience, irrational idealism, publicity-seeking behaviour and, worse, being paid to campaign, such movements have really caught the public's attention. Which can only be a good thing considering the sad state of our planet.

These young people's advocacy is changing the landscape of environmental activism.

"We need people to join us, we need people to be more aware of climate change – and the only way that is going to happen is to gather more voices," says Aroe, adding that Kamy is collaborating with other environmental rights groups such as Klimata Action Utara Malaysia (Kaum) in Penang and Persatuan Aktivis Sahabat Alam (Kuasa) in Ipoh.

Malaysians, she says, are becoming more

aware of the problems of climate change, especially as news about illegal plastic waste dumping in the country is also making headlines around the world.

She notes that social media is a driving factor in pushing environmental issues to the forefront and predicts that soon, greater awareness will snowball into more tangible action.

"When more people join this movement, we will be heard and we can push for the government to take action and tell them that the issue of climate change is an emergency," she says.

Like Aroe, 25-year-old Jasmin Irisha Jim Itham is on a mission.

Her love for the environment started at a young age. Growing up, she was exposed to nature and the great outdoors as her grandfather, who was a forestry ranger at the Forest Research Institute of Malaysia, took her for picnics and walks in the jungle.

Jasmin first got involved in environmental activism when she was just 14, recycling her waste and joining NGOs.

However, it was while attending her first United Nations Climate Change conference in 2016 as a member of the Malaysian Youth

Delegation (MYD) that she noticed a lack of representation by one group in the discussions about climate change – youths.

"I noticed that youth were still underrepresented at these international platforms and our voices were not being heard," says Jasmin, who studied Environmental Science at university.

MYD was formed in 2015 to give youths a voice on global platforms, she says, and it organises monthly public learning sessions on climate change issues.

The MYD, she adds, also engages frequently with the Energy, Science, Technology, Environment and Climate Change Ministry and its predecessor, the Natural Resources and Environment Ministry, on environmental matters.

Describing her first conference in 2016 as "eye-opening" – she also attended the UN-organised climate talks in Germany in 2017 – Jasmin was fascinated by how the scientific research surrounding climate change issues is related to international policies and diplomacy.

She says there is a slowly growing awareness of climate change issues and it is the youths who are leading the charge on the matter.

She believes the youth movement led by Thunberg played an important role in last year's Climate Change Conference in Poland.

"We still have the negotiations on climate change taking place between national leaders in the meeting rooms but what goes on outside the meeting rooms is also important.

"You have to balance out what the government is doing with what civil society is doing, because we play an important role in pushing the government to act faster," says Jasmin, who is now a research associate with the KL-based Jeffrey Sachs Centre on Sustainable Development.

For her, it is not enough to just be holding rallies and gatherings. Calling for policy changes, she says, requires serious and concrete action.

"For example, if you're striking at Parliament for a certain demand, you have to be very clear about it. You don't just go out and shout, you need to follow up with the local council or government on the matter," she says.

But will adults take the youths' demands for environmental action seriously? Jasmin spells out the risks if we do not.

"We have 11 years before the earth's temperature is expected to increase by 2°C, which means we will suffer even more biodiversity loss, species extinction.

"People do need to listen to the young because it's about intergenerational equity. We are the ones who are at risk, and we are the ones who are moving forward into the future," she says.

Aroe agrees with her.

"As Greta said, change is coming whether you like it or not. This climate rally is getting bigger and people cannot avoid it."