

Tuesday, 2 October 2007

Auditor-general's report: Give priority to most glaring concerns

By : DATUK AHMAD SIDEK, Petaling Jaya

THE Auditor-General's Report has generated much public interest and concern on the ways public money had been spent. We salute the government for its openness and accountability in letting the public know how and where their money is spent.

As commented by the chairman of parliament's Public Accounts Committee, Datuk Shahrir Samad, at least now the public is more aware of what's going on in the various government departments, unlike 10 years ago.

Those of us who served the government in the 1960s and 1970s were shocked and disbelieving after reading the report, because these things could never have happened during that time. Such episodes are due to a total disregard for rules, regulations and procedures relating to public spending.

To be fair, we cannot point fingers only at civil servants for these debacles. Nor can we blame the present administration. Almost everything in the A-G's report happened during the previous administration. And this is where the dilemma lies - how and where to draw the line of responsibility and accountability between the previous and present administrations, when everything is done in the name of "collective responsibility".

It would be foolhardy for the present administration not to accept responsibility for what happened in the past because they were also a party to it. In such trying circumstances, there is no way we can really get at the truth of how and why these incidents happened without possible social consequences and even a political backlash.

In such circumstances, what could be done would be to undertake a juggling exercise of sorts, using the art of the possible. Any government would be loath to embarrass itself through exposure of scandals and other malpractice.

We believe that whatever actions that will be taken from now on, and the speed with which they are taken, will only come out of this process. For those who want to "see blood" or immediate results following immediate action, be prepared for disappointment as it is not going to happen too soon. Again, that would also be contrary to our norm and culture.

But we hope the PAC will give top priority to those really glaring items in the report, instead of spending too much time on the less important ones, notwithstanding that they are equally important and subject to the same principles of scrutiny. We also want the Anti-Corruption Agency to investigate the A-G's findings.

Tuesday, 2 October 2007

Poser over China trip for Selangor BN assemblymen

KLANG: Selangor Barisan Nasional assemblymen have been accused of using state funds to pay for an all-expenses tour of the Silk Road in China. State Opposition leader and Sungai Pinang assemblyman Teng Chang Khim said the assemblymen took their spouses along for the 11-day trip.

Providing an itinerary of the trip, he said the assemblymen and their spouses were divided into three groups. The first two groups left on Aug 21 and Sept 1, while the last group is due to leave in the last week of this month. According to the itinerary of the trip to China, arranged by a well-known Kuala Lumpur-based tour agency, the group that left on August went to Beijing, Urumqi, Turpan, Kashi and Guangzhou.

Among the places they visited were the Fragrant Concubine's tomb in Kashi, the Grape Valley and Flaming Mountain in Turpan, and Shangxiajiu pedestrian shopping street in Guangzhou. The itinerary also included visits to several mosques in various cities and several breaks for shopping.

Teng said all BN assemblymen and their spouses were invited for the trip but the final number that went on the trip was not clear. There are 54 BN assemblymen in Selangor. The two other seats are held by the DAP. He said that according to reliable sources, the trip was paid by the state BN, presumably using funds allocated by the Menteri Besar's office.

"This is obviously a trip to reward them. It's full of shopping and sight-seeing stops." In an immediate response, Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Dr Mohd Khir Toyo denied the funds were from the state. The assemblymen used their own money to pay for the trip, he said. He said it was an educational trip on beautification and cleanliness. "I am not sure where they went but every year, they are encouraged to go on educational trips. It was organised by the state BN but they have to bear the cost on their own."

He said Teng should get his facts right before making such allegations. "He is a lawyer. How can a learned person say such things without checking his facts? It's very bad. It's very shameful and a wrong allegation." Meanwhile, the NST contacted three BN assemblymen to get more details on the trip.

All three said they were yet to go on the trip and would most likely join the last batch. Two of them said they would be paying for the trip and denied that state funds were being used. Asked how much they paid, they claimed that the bill had not yet been sent to them. Both agreed that the state BN was organising it. One called it a retreat for assemblymen while the other called it a trip for exposure. However, the third assemblyman said the trip was paid mostly by the state BN.

"We only paid about RM1,500 each while the rest was taken care of. I don't know what the actual cost is." Teng also urged the auditor-general to initiate a special investigation into all trips organised by the state and local authorities that used state funds in the past 10 years. He said some of the trips were believed to have been sponsored by state agencies like PKNS and Selangor State Investment Centre.

Thursday, 04 October 2007

Seeing stars

RATING systems are fairly ubiquitous. Some of us swear by them and would never choose a movie without checking the number of stars next to a film review, or select a college without looking up its position in a university league table. There is no doubt that top rankings could be great for morale and low scores make for bad publicity. It's hard not to be proud when you're ranked high and not to be mortified when you're way down the list. It therefore seems quite appropriate that a star-rating system is to be used to evaluate the performance of local councils. After all, the use of performance indicators is not new and has been quite well-established.

There is no question that we need to measure the efficiency and effectiveness of the local authorities. As the lowest level of administration in the country, local councils are the first crucial contact points at the grassroots. With the current emphasis on improving the delivery of public services and developing a civil service work culture based on performance, the warts-and-all rating system will go some way towards providing a full picture of the strengths and weaknesses of the local councils.

The comprehensive way of comparing institutions of a similar kind in an easy-to-understand format is to be welcomed as an attempt to promote a greater degree of transparency. It provides residents with an easily understandable report card about whether their local councils measure up to expectations.

But it is a matter of some regret that, unlike the rankings to be introduced by the auditor-general next year, there seems little likelihood that under-performing council chiefs will be in danger of missing out on promotions or losing their jobs. This is a pity, more so as the intention seems to be to improve performance by holding them accountable for the quality of the services that they deliver and for the taxpayer money they spend. It is time to ship them out if they can't shape up.

Moreover, as well-intentioned as the star ratings may be, the special inspectorate will only be activated when local councils fail the biennial check-up. This may be akin to closing the stable door well after the horse has bolted. Instead of relying too much on historical data to assess performance and kick-start monitoring mechanisms, the premium should be put on real-time performance measures, reports and reviews, regular inspections and immediate action.

Friday, 05 October 2007

Direct negotiations open to abuse, says Shahrir

KUALA LUMPUR: Government projects should be awarded through open tenders instead of direct negotiations. In making the call, Public Accounts Committee chairman Datuk Shahrir Samad said the direct negotiation method was open to abuse.

"It is best to use direct negotiations only if the number of persons who are able to handle the project are limited. If we limit the number of projects awarded through direct negotiations, this will make our contractors even more professional and Malaysia a competitive country," he said.

Shahrir was speaking after chairing the Public Accounts Committee meeting on the expenditure by the Ministry of Youth and Sports for eight Institute Kemahiran Belia (IKBN) centres yesterday. The expenditure was one of the irregularities highlighted in the Auditor-General's Report last month. Youth and Sports Ministry secretary-general Datuk Mohd Yasin Mohd Salleh attended the meeting with seven of his officers.

"What was reported by the auditor-general in this case proves what we have been saying to the public and parliament all this while. Every time there is a direct negotiation or turnkey project, all sorts of problems will come up," said Shahrir. The Youth and Sports Ministry was allocated RM1.129 billion to build nine IKBN centres under the Ninth Malaysian Plan.

However, Shahrir said they had built only eight centres and still went over budget by RM200 million. Auditor-General Tan Sri Ambrin Buang had also pointed out that for the purchase of equipment, the government paid an excess of RM8.39 million compared to market prices.

"In terms of the budget, there was little control. The Treasury did not monitor the process. There was also a big difference in the price of equipment that was bought," said Shahrir. He said the PAC supported the auditor-general's recommendation that the officers involved in the acquisition of materials and equipment should pay a surcharge to be deducted from their salaries.

He said the PAC wanted the audit department and the Treasury to establish internal audit committees to monitor each direct negotiation project in the future.

"While this used to be done by the secretary-general (of the relevant ministry), this function will be taken over by the audit department." He added that the audit department would also be improved to cope with its expanded functions. Shahrir said the PAC had also requested that the Treasury gives a list of all direct negotiation projects under the Ninth Malaysia Plan.

Saturday, 06 October 2007

Styrofoam crises lighten mood

KUALA LUMPUR: Heah Tick Lai caused a stir when he wielded two crises made out of styrofoam during the Gerakan Youth debates yesterday. The hall was in stitches as he comically held the two crises above his head and said his action was not to challenge anyone but, rather, a symbol of unity for the rakyat.

"We are all `anak Malaysia' (Malaysian children). I hope that next time, Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Hussein will hold the kris and shout `unity for all Malaysians!'," he said, in reference to the kris-waving incident at the Umno general assembly last year. Heah's spirited performance was the highlight in the two-hour long debate session, which saw issues such as corruption and security among the main topics discussed.

Many touched on the Auditor-General's Report, which had revealed many discrepancies and wastage of funds. Wong Kar San, from the Bandar Tun Razak division, called for the immediate sacking of civil servants who were guilty of corruption and the misappropriation of funds.

"The government should take harsh action by firing all officers who are corrupt and not trustworthy," he said. The Youth and Wanita resolutions were all passed after the debates. Gerakan Youth passed seven resolutions, calling for, among others:

- * The government to probe and reveal the root cause of rising crime rates;
- * Immediate action against corrupt government officials and ministries who squandered public funds;
- * The government to introduce a free-for-all economic pie to attract more foreign investors and improve the level of competition among local businesses; and,
- * More programmes to help elevate the livelihood of the poor in rural areas. The women' wing, meanwhile, passed four resolutions, which called for:
 - * The government to uphold the sovereignty of the federal constitution;
 - * Higher integrity and a commitment for quality from the government with regards to the country's administration and selections of political candidates;
 - * Equal treatment for women in politics, a meritocracy-based education and workplace system; and,
 - * The government to increase the quality of the police force.

Tuesday, 9 October 2007

Ministers must be responsible

WE refer to the report "Punish wastage of funds" (NST, Sept 27) and cannot agree more. Although the Auditor-General's Report is detailed, we wonder why no minister or ministry seems to be taking responsibility.

Every year, the auditor-general publishes his report but nobody takes responsibility for his ministry.

As taxpayers, we expect ministers to take responsibility and be accountable for any discrepancy that happens in their ministries.

We believe that serving in a political office is a privilege, not a right. Any public official found not doing his job must vacate his position.

PHILIP WONG PAK MING

President

Sarawak-Sabah Foochow Association, Malaysia

Friday, 12 October 2007

Sidek: Action against officers accused in report

PUTRAJAYA: Civil servants with hands in the till, who had abused their power or approved government procurement for exorbitant prices have been warned - your goose is cooked. Chief Secretary to the Government Tan Sri Mohd Sidek Hassan said allegations against government servants are being investigated thoroughly and if they are found guilty they face dismissal, demotion and/or prosecution. He warned those who have provided written explanations to the show-cause letters issued by their heads of department not to feel exonerated since no action had been taken yet.

"All written explanations are being checked to ensure that they are credible. "Officers are poring over the documents and if there is an iota of evidence, we will take action," he told a briefing for senior editors at his office. He said while it has been a practice to regularly release the names of officers who have been promoted to the press, he plans to issue the list of officers who have been admonished, dismissed, demoted or prosecuted to be made public to show that the government was sincere in being transparent.

"The list will be issued once every three months to show that the government means business." Sidek said among those investigated are civil servants who have been linked to fiascos highlighted in the 2006 Auditor-General's Report where items were purchased at exorbitant prices, contracts were over-priced and there has been an abuse of power. "Civil servants mentioned in the Auditor-General's Report and found to have been negligent in carrying out their duties or had committed irregularities will be dealt with without fear or favour if they are unable to provide credible explanations for their actions.

"The public does not have to wait until next year or the next Auditor-General's Report. Investigations are on-going and action will be taken against them as soon as possible." Sidek said the government took a serious view of the offences and would not condone the actions of a few who tarnished the image of the civil service. He said, however, the investigations would be thorough and sufficient evidence would be gathered before action is initiated.

"It will not be a kangaroo court. There must be proper investigations and this could take time." Sidek said he had already instructed Auditor-General Tan Sri Ambrin Buang to publish in his next report on what actions were taken over the alleged misappropriations.

The recently publicised wastage of funds in last year's Auditor-General's Report drew the ire of many citizens who felt that no action had been taken to punish the wrongdoers in the civil service. Sidek explained that previously the punishment meted out to civil servants had always been an internal matter.

"We have demoted people who have not performed, but it was not made public. Even at the highest level possible - which includes some directors-general - some have been told to go on optional retirement. "Even if no disciplinary action is taken against those who do not perform, we move them in a way that encourages them to leave."

He said the investigations into the misappropriations reported by the Auditor-General would be undertaken by an internal auditor or the Public Service Department if it was a disciplinary case, or by the Anti-Corruption Agency if the case involved corruption. He also urged the local media to be fair and credible in their reporting.

"For example, if you write about policemen who are charged with corruption you must also write about the good that the police force is doing," he said. Sidek said the government has also been implementing recommendations made by the Special Task Force To Facilitate Business (Pemudah) to reduce bureaucracy and more ministries and departments have been directed to provide online services to reduce waiting time for the public.

Sidek said Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi was instrumental in initiating various measures aimed at improving the civil service, effecting a better delivery system, cutting red tape and combating corruption.

Saturday, 13 October 2007

Hot on the audit trail

It is axiomatic that when investigations reveal that bribery, corruption or criminal breach of trust has been committed, the perpetrators should be prosecuted in court. In the case of workers who do not follow rules and regulations, the kind of disciplinary action that could be taken against them range from admonitions to dismissals.

In a sense, therefore, the chief secretary to the government's warning that "negligent" civil servants or those who had committed "irregularities" would be "dealt with without fear for favour" could be dismissed as a stock response to problems of discipline in the civil service, if not for two things.

Firstly, it was made with specific reference to the Auditor-General's Report. The significance of this cannot be over-emphasised because it addresses the common complaint that the report is not taken as seriously and acted upon as it should be and little is done to punish those responsible for the irregularities.

Coming as it does close on the heels of the announcement that the promotion of secretaries-general and heads of department will be tied to the star ratings to be introduced next year, it shows that the government is giving the situation the degree of urgency that it deserves.

It is indeed time that quick and decisive action is taken against those responsible for the dubious dealings. It should help to promote greater accountability in the civil service. In this context, what is striking is the proposal to publish a quarterly name-and-shame list of those who had been reprimanded, demoted or sacked. In terms of giving a better picture of the civil service, this is more desirable than the standard practice of keeping it behind closed doors.

Making public the names of those who have been punished should go some way towards assuring the public that action has been taken and make civil servants think twice about making merry with public money. However, it would seem that wielding the big stick seems easier said than done in the civil service, if the common practice of lateral transfers in the absence of formal disciplinary action is any indication.

Indeed, it can take a long time because disciplinary cases can go all the way to the highest level of the appeals board. Moreover, in a wider sense, the goal of a good disciplinary system should not be solely to punish but to correct problems. This is why more performance audits should be done by the auditor-general to better identify the pockets of inefficiency and the weaknesses in implementation.

Tuesday, 23 October 2007

ACA arrests 10 over abuse of government funds

KUALA LUMPUR: Ten people have been arrested by the Anti-Corruption Agency over mismanagement of funds highlighted by the Auditor-General's report. Six of them are from the Welfare Department, two are Youth and Sports Ministry officers and two others.

They are expected to be charged under the Anti-Corruption Act 1967 in the Sessions Courts in Kelantan, Pahang and Sabah today. Sources told Berita Harian that the Sports Ministry officers were nabbed, along with two others - a negotiator and a contractor - yesterday in connection with an RM8.39 million scheme to provide equipment to the Kelantan branch of the National Youth Skills Institute.

They will be charged in the Kota Baru Sessions Court today. The six Welfare Department officers are expected to be charged with embezzling money allocated for projects. One officer will be charged at the Raub court and the other five at the Kota Kinabalu court today.

ACA deputy director (I) Datuk Abu Kassim Mohamed confirmed the arrests. It is learnt that the ACA will hold a press conference today on the arrests and its investigation of mismanagement of funds in government departments and agencies highlighted in the Auditor-General's Report, which was released on Budget Day in the Dewan Rakyat on Sept 7. Youth and Sports Minister Datuk Seri Azalina Othman said her ministry would assist and co-operate with the ACA in its investigation.

"I have ordered my ministry to give the ACA 100 per cent support in its investigations right from the first time the Auditor-General's report was published. "We encourage them to investigate the matter fully and we back whatever action they take against the offenders. We will not hide any facts," she said.

The report exposed how several government departments wasted public funds needlessly. This included buying 13 items for the National Youth Skills Institute for RM8.39 million - way above the market rates. Two crane towers were purchased for RM5.72 million when their cost was RM2.98 million.

The Youth and Sports Ministry also purchased 17 sets of technical books for RM181,900, or RM10,700 per set, when it was priced at RM417 each. ACA director-general Datuk Ahmad Said Hamdan last Friday said his department had almost completed investigations and would be taking action against several individuals soon.

On Sept 13, Pahang Welfare Department director Datuk Bakar Mamat said his department was taking disciplinary action against its staff in Raub and Bentong for defrauding the department of RM113,044.

Wednesday, 24 October 2007

ACA calls for review on negotiations for govt tenders

PUTRAJAYA: The Anti-Corruption Agency has called for a thorough review of direct negotiation procedures for government tenders. Its director-general Datuk Ahmad Said Hamdan said the process of direct purchasing should be made foolproof and transparent.

The department, which is hot on the heels of individuals involved in the dubious dealings pointed out by the 2006 Auditor-General's Report, also wants contractors to be constantly warned of the consequences of defrauding the government. Ahmad Said said a clause reminding contractors of offences under the Anti-Corruption Act 1997 would be inserted prominently on all government contracts.

"This will serve as a reminder to them to refrain from corruption. If it is found that any corrupt act had taken place, the contract would be terminated immediately," he said. Meanwhile, ACA deputy director (I) Datuk Abu Kassim Mohamed said some contractors thought it was unethical for them to commit fraud in their dealings with the government, not realising they had committed a criminal act. With the clause, he said unscrupulous contractors could no longer feign ignorance.

The department's continuing investigations have exposed weaknesses in the systems employed within the public services, especially those related to procurement. Loopholes in the systems, the ACA noted, made it easy for abuse to occur. Ahmad Said said, as reflected in the 2006 audit report, scores of procurement contracts were concluded through direct negotiations.

The ACA had also recommended that the government blacklist equipment suppliers in the controversial National Youth Skills Institute (IKBN) case, he said. Ahmad Said said in the IKBN case, a company had supplied 430 mortar board sets at a price tag of RM1,027.20 each, when their market price was RM150.

The boards were purchased from another company for RM180. On cabins which were acquired at RM142,000 each, Ahmad Said said a fully-equipped one, complete with air-conditioning and lighting, should only cost around RM14,000.

On the purchase of technical books at RM10,700 per set, he said the ACA's investigations showed it ranged from RM500 to RM1,500. A company had also supplied IKBN with 172 sets of technical pens at RM1,146.50 and RM546.47 per set, when the market price for the two types of pens supplied were RM120 and RM200 per set.

Investigations into the irregularities uncovered in the Auditor-General's Report are far from over. On the latest developments in its probes following the audit report, Ahmad Said said they focused on corruption, abuse of power and misappropriation of funds. The ACA is also recommending disciplinary action against five other senior officers from the Youth and Sports Ministry.

Wednesday, 24 October 2007

10 charged with mismanagement of funds

KUALA LUMPUR: Ten people were charged in courts throughout the country with mismanagement of funds highlighted in the Auditor-General's report. Five were charged in Kota Kinabalu, four in Kota Baru and one in Raub. The Anti-Corruption Agency yesterday arrested another Youth and Sports Ministry officer in Temerloh.

The 33-year-old is expected to be charged in Seremban today for an offence allegedly committed while he was attached to the Chembong National Skills Institute. The five charged in Kota Kinabalu were Penampang district acting treasurer Stanislaus Golingi, 51, his assistant Irene Lazarus Nicholas, 36, administrative assistant Rasiah @ Thomy Sumbat, 48, community development assistant Rosminie Borilok, 42, and general clerical assistant Masni @ Masnah Bte Sairin, 55.

They were alleged to have certified the payment of cash aid under the Old Age Assistance Scheme to those who were already dead. Rasiah, Rosminie and Masni are all attached to the Tuaran district Welfare Department office. Stanislaus was charged with 22 counts of cheating involving the payment of cash aid last year to Boliking Sabanta, Launentia Binin Majangkun, Esah Polok and Joikin Ginunjil, all of whom were dead. Irene was charged with abetting Stanislaus.

Both accused pleaded not guilty and were released on RM3,000 bail by Sessions Court judge Duncan Sikodol, who fixed Jan 28-31 next year for trial. Rasiah and Rosminie were charged with six counts of cheating by falsely authorising the payment of cash aid to Dayang Ismail between February and November last year, and to Andah Jair in June last year. Dayang had died on Dec 16, 2003, while Andah died on Feb 17 last year.

Masni was charged with abetting Rasiah and Rosminie. The three pleaded not guilty and were released on RM2,000 bail each by Sessions Court judge P. Ravindran who fixed Dec 9-12 next year for trial. Meanwhile, four persons were charged in Kota Baru including Sandakan Industrial Training Institute director Kamaruzaman Md Ali.

The others were Universiti Teknologi Malaysia innovation and consultancy bureau representative Ismail Ibrahim, Bachok National Skills Institute skills assistant director Loh Hong Wai and Kosijaya Didactic Sdn Bhd project manager Loh Siu Lee. They were charged at two Sessions Courts.

Kamaruzaman, 38, was charged with signing a document which contained falsified details of a digital camera, Kodak Digital Camera DC4800, on Jan 28, 2003, at the Bachok National Skills Institute. He was alleged to have approved that the camera worked according to standard specification. The item was also supplied separately from its package, which include a Windows 2000 software and a personal computer.

The accused was the skills development division assistant director-general at that time. Ismail, 51, Hong Wai, 31 and Siu Lee, 38, were charged with abetting Kamaruzaman to sign the document. Sessions Court judge Che Zulkifly Jusoh set RM8,000 bail in one surety each for Kamaruzaman and Ismail, while judge Gulam Muhiaddeen Abdul Aziz set RM7,000 bail in one surety for Hong Wai and Siu Lee.

The cases will be mentioned on Nov 28. In Raub, Welfare Department officer Sidek Ab Raman, 47, faced 22 counts of breach of trust for taking financial aid of a total of RM12,175 on behalf of 22 underprivileged people who had died. He allegedly committed the offences between January and December last year while he was the assistant community development officer at the department's office here.

Sidek, who is now attached to the department's state headquarters in Kuantan, claimed trial to all charges. Judge Zainal Abidin Kamarudin set bail at RM10,000 in one surety. He also ordered Sidek to report to the ACA office in Kuantan every month and not to leave Kuantan without the court's approval. The case will be mentioned on Dec 19.

Wednesday, 24 October 2007

ACA proposes study into direct purchases

HOPING for a more transparent direct purchasing mechanism, the Anti-Corruption Agency has proposed to the government that a comprehensive study on the direct purchasing system practised by government agencies and departments be carried out. ACA director-general Datuk Ahmad Said Hamdan said investigations by the agency showed that there are several loopholes that open up opportunities for corruption and embezzlement.

"Our investigations into the Auditor-General's 2006 audit revealed that equipment purchases were mostly done through the direct negotiation method, thus creating room for malpractices," he told a Press conference at the ACA headquarters in Putrajaya yesterday. Also present was deputy director-general (I) Datuk Abu Kassim Mohamed.

Ahmad Said also proposed that another study be conducted to include in all government contract documents a clause under the Anti-Corruption Act, 1997. The clause, he said, would explain the offences under the Act to serve as a reminder to those with the intention to commit corruption and embezzlement.

"The clause was included in the Tsunami Aid Relief effort and it worked very well. "If with the clause, and yet malpractices still take place, we ask that the contract be terminated immediately," he added. He also proposed that the companies which supplied equipment to the National Youth Skills Institutes (IKBN) and did not adhere to the procedures be blacklisted.

The ACA is also recommending that disciplinary action be taken against five senior officers from the Youth and Sports Ministry for violating the conduct and disciplinary regulations for civil servants. Ahmad Said said the senior officers were involved in a meeting to discuss the purchases of tools and appliances that were supplied to eight branches of IKBN at high prices, resulting a loss to the government.

The officers, he said, were also found to have gone abroad without necessary permission as stipulated under the General Orders and received entertainment allowances from a contractor.

"Apart from the five officers, we are still investigating six more officers, who are believed to have a hand in the matter. "After completing our investigations, we will refer the case to the Attorney-General."

Ahmad Said said investigations of misappropriation of funds into several purchases, which were highly and unreasonably priced, were still ongoing. The purchased items were mortar boards, cabin containers, technical books as well as Faber Castell and Staedler Mars technical pens.

Thursday, 25 October 2007

Delivering the goods

THE director-general of the Anti-Corruption Agency appears to have admitted that while the agency had previously acted on the Auditor-General's Report, this was the first time its actions had been "highlighted". It should not be the last time that the results of its probes into the irregularities uncovered by the auditor-general are made public.

Certainly not when six more officials are still under investigation, only those who pocketed the money meant for the needy and those involved in the over-priced digital cameras have been charged in court, and those responsible for the purchase of mortar boards, cabin containers, technical books and technical pens at inflated prices have still to be identified and indicted.

Certainly, just as it should be a matter of routine for the ACA to follow up on the questionable purchases, dubious dealings and non-compliance with Treasury instructions and directives on the procurement of goods and services, it should make a point to keep the public in the picture about the investigations, arrests and prosecutions it has made.

As it is, while there has been a very conspicuous campaign to curb corruption, this has not been matched by public progress reports in terms of proven cases, litigations, and court hearings. In the fight against corruption, the bureaucratic preference for washing its dirty linen behind closed doors should not apply.

When this seeming reluctance to do anything which could be construed as undermining the morale of the civil service is taken as an indication of the weakness of enforcement and the lack of political will, it can only reinforce the perception that the anti-corruption drive has been long on rhetoric and short on delivery.

The public signs that the ACA is astir, building momentum and prepared to be more forthcoming about its doings bode well, therefore, because it is the greater risk of being exposed and caught that is such a crucial element in any successful anti-corruption campaign.

Clearly, however, while it is vital to catch and punish the corrupt bureaucrats who receive the kickbacks and the unethical businessmen who make the pay-offs, more importantly, what is needed are preventive measures.

It was with a view to limit the opportunities for corruption that more than three years ago, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi announced that open tenders should be the norm and direct negotiations restricted to special cases. While rules alone are not enough, more transparent procurement processes and procedures should help to reduce the temptations for corruption.

Thursday, 25 October 2007

And now to hook the big fish ... hopefully

SO, finally, the wheels of justice are beginning to grind. Finally, we are seeing action against government servants based on the Auditor-General's Report on mismanagement of funds and abuse of authority. Every year, without fail, the auditor-general and his team pore over thousands of documents. Every year, without fail, the auditor-general enumerates the problems faced, the shortcomings and the wastage of funds. Every year, without fail, the Auditor-General's Report is tabled in parliament and is hotly debated. Every year, without fail, someone in authority either warns government servants to buck up or promises stern action. This year, finally, there is action. Ten people were charged in courts throughout the country on Tuesday with mismanagement of public funds.

Five were charged with certifying the payment of cash aid under the Old Age Assistance Scheme to those already dead. Four were charged in Kota Baru with falsifying, or abetting in falsifying, documents leading to the approval of the purchase of items which were not in proper working condition. The 10th person was charged in Raub with 22 counts of breach of trust by taking financial aid amounting to RM12,175 in the name of 22 underprivileged people who had died. Yesterday, two of the men who had earlier been charged in Kota Baru, and another person, were charged in Seremban with mismanaging government funds four years ago.

Although I don't like to see people suffer and do not relish seeing anyone being charged in court or punished, I must say I'm glad. The government deserves a pat. It speaks well for Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's desire to fight corruption and improve the public delivery system. For far too long, some civil servants have been spending public money as if it belonged to them or they have been pocketing them or they have worked out deals with suppliers and contractors to enrich themselves. In the process, they have done a disservice to fellow civil servants who perform their duties without giving in to temptation.

After the Auditor-General's Report was tabled in parliament, Abdullah directed that action be taken against civil servants responsible for the abuses outlined in the report. The Chief Secretary to the Government, Tan Sri Mohd Sidek Hassan had said on a few occasions that action would be taken against civil servants with hands in the till or who had abused their power or approved government procurement at exorbitant prices. I believe many Malaysians, going by past experience, would have brushed these aside as more hot air. But I'm sure they are glad to have been proved wrong and that the government is walking the talk. I hope it will not stop here.

Coffee shop talk has it that the big fish get away while the small fish are fried. Malaysians, I'm sure, would like to see action against the big fish. And while the government is at it, why not look at what some politicians have been up to? Coffee shop talk has it that some of them have been rather busy amassing wealth through not so dissimilar means. Whatever it is, coffee shop talk, at least for now, will not revolve around the impotency of the government in tackling abuses outlined in the Auditor-General's Report. For finally, the tedious work of the auditor-general and his merry men (and women) has not gone to waste. Syabas.

Thursday, 25 October 2007

ACA: Big or small, we'll get you

PUTRAJAYA: The Anti-Corruption Agency made it clear that it does not discriminate when hunting down those involved in corruption. "As long as they are corrupt, we will go after them, regardless of their status," said Director-General Datuk Ahmad Said Hamdan in the wake of the recent arrests of several government officials and policemen.

"They can be small or big fry, they will be netted." He said this when it was pointed out that people were still skeptical as those arrested were mainly rank and file personnel in the civil service. In earlier reports, he had said that the recent spate of arrests following the Auditor-General's Report was not the end of the issue.

More arrests are expected especially after it was revealed that at least six more Youth and Sports Ministry officials are being investigated. Ahmad Said said the department gave equal attention to all its cases. On the case of the senior police officer who had allegedly amassed a fortune of RM27 million, Ahmad Said said the case was still being investigated.

"We need more time. The speed of cases being wrapped up and made ready for prosecution depends on the Attorney-General's Chambers. We investigate and forward cases to the A-G, who will then decide if there are grounds for prosecution." On the number of cases where disciplinary action was taken against civil servants, Ahmad Said said there were only 10 cases left now from more than 1,000 cases last year.

The action taken against these errant civil servants was anything from warnings to dismissals. On why exorbitantly priced equipment in government tenders obtained through direct negotiations were approved by the Treasury in the first place, Ahmad Said said the onus to ascertain authenticity of claims was on the ministry.

This, he said, was because once such tenders reached the Treasury for approval, they normally did not list the breakdown of individual items.

"The ministries involved would have already gone through that process. "Otherwise, there is room for manipulation of contracts and that is what is happening. "There must be honest officers involved in the purchase of items for ministries."

Thursday, 25 October 2007

`Plug loopholes in govt body'

AUDITOR-GENERAL Tan Sri Ambrin Buang said efforts must be made to plug loopholes in government agencies to prevent unscrupulous people from exploiting the system.

"A thorough review of negotiation procedures could help prevent corruption and must be supported," he said, with reference to a suggestion by the Anti-Corruption Agency for a thorough review of direct negotiation procedures for government tenders.

Commenting on the move to charge civil servants who abuse public funds based on the 2006 Auditor-General's Report, he said: "Let the law take its course."

Ambrin said the fact that there had been a follow-up showed that the government was serious in tackling such problems. "What's important here is that the government is doing the appropriate thing," he said when asked whether he was satisfied with the legal actions taken by the government.

- Bernama

Monday, 29 October 2007

Audit on government buildings nearly done

PUTRAJAYA: The Auditor-General has completed the first phase of checks of more than 100 federal buildings in Putrajaya and the Klang Valley. Those that have serious defects are undergoing a second audit phase. Tan Sri Ambrin Buang described the first phase as a "condition audit" where checks were conducted on the buildings' present condition.

Those with defects were shortlisted for an "integrity audit", which takes a closer look at the problem. "The first stage is more or less completed for all buildings. We are now progressing with the integrity audit on buildings which have defects. "We are looking into the causes of the defects and who should be responsible," Ambrin told the New Straits Times. However, he declined to disclose the number of buildings with serious defects.

He said a report and recommendations would be submitted to the cabinet soon. The cabinet had ordered the audit in May following a series of defects earlier this year in new government buildings which caused indoor flooding and ceilings to crash. Ambrin heads a committee which includes officers from the Public Works Department, the respective ministries and Putrajaya Holdings, the master developer of Putrajaya.

As the nature of the audit is technical, a consultant was appointed to carry out the audit on behalf of the committee. Ambrin said PWD technicians and other engineers, who sat on the committee, also gave their views. Hence, he added, there was an exchange of views.

"We have had a series of discussions drawing on the expertise of other engineers and technicians for every draft report," he said. Problems with buildings in Putrajaya and the Kuala Lumpur court complex in Jalan Duta have been especially embarrassing for the government because the buildings are still new.

In April, the Immigration Department head office in Putrajaya was flooded when a main pipe burst, while another incident at the Entrepreneur and Co-operative Development Ministry saw the ceiling of its multipurpose hall collapse. In May, parts of the ceiling in the Kuala Lumpur court complex building collapsed and cracks appeared on a wall.