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Departmental heads get an earful

PUTRAJAYA: Departmental heads in the civil service should start taking greater interest in what's happening in their departments.

This is because the public has been asking whether action is actually taken against those who commit wrongdoings, which include mismanagement of public funds and wastage. Auditor-General Tan Sri Ambrin Buang wants departmental heads to stop blaming their predecessors for the inefficiencies in their departments.

"A lot of questions are raised when the Auditor-General's Report is tabled. "The public wants to know why the same mistakes, such as the mismanagement of funds, are being made year in year out. "The public is asking whether there is any point in doing these audits because it seems like those audited are least bothered with the observations carried out," he said in the latest edition of Buletin Audit. The Auditor-General's Report, he said, was an instrument for the public to gauge the level of the public delivery system and good governance. Ambrin said departmental heads should take note of this because the country's leaders had always stressed on the importance of accountability and integrity in the civil service.

The other weaknesses usually raised in the report are centred on the maintenance of accounts, poor management of assets/bills, and poor controls on spending and revenue collection. "It is strange that some departments have received ISO certification in certain work processes but when it comes to financial management, they have no quality control." Ambrin reminded departmental heads that they were not only supposed to take note of the wrongdoings in areas under their jurisdiction but also make sure they took corrective measures. This is important because some government employees are careless and don't follow the rules. "Worse still, we have cases where civil servants deliberately made mistakes for their gain or to benefit others," he added.

In previous interviews, Ambrin had said the government was exposed to losses running into hundreds of millions of ringgit because civil servants did not study purchase agreements signed with IT vendors. There were also situations where millions of ringgit had been paid to vendors, but the equipment had not been installed or delivered in full. The most talked-about issue in the past two years was the delay in the construction of the Matrade building, which was supposed to cost RM167 million. Eventually, it took 12 years and RM287.5 million to complete. Ambrin said heads should make sure that the meetings of the financial and account management committees were regularly held.

"It is not enough that these meetings are held. Departmental heads must make sure whatever weaknesses raised in the Auditor-General's Report are addressed," he said, adding that they should also conduct surprise visits. Inefficiencies and bureaucracy in some sections of the civil service have also got the attention of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. On Jan 11, he announced the setting up of a task force to be co-chaired by Chief Secretary to the government Tan Sri Sidek Hassan and a leading member from the private sector. Cuepacs, the

umbrella organisation for workers' unions in the civil service, agreed that some civil servants were giving the government service a bad name.