

1. MACC hands over 18 files on errant civil servants to A-G

KUALA LUMPUR: SOME 18 investigation papers (IPs) on alleged irregularities by civil servants as pointed out in the Auditor-General's Report 2012 have been forwarded to the Attorney-General's Chambers.

Chief Secretary to the Government Tan Sri Dr Ali Hamsa said as of Feb 21, the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) had opened 18 IPs based on the report's findings.

Criminal and civil action would be taken against civil servants suspected of being involved in irregularities, he said.

"Investigations have been completed and all cases have been forwarded to the Attorney-General's Chambers for further action and gathering of witness statements," he said yesterday.

The cases included:

FALSE claims by a Works Ministry director who signed work completion certificates for two building projects totalling RM124 million, even though the projects were incomplete and did not meet required specifications;

FALSE claims by a Malaysian Youth Council officer involving RM1.53 million for a project which was never carried out;

ABUSE of power by an Urban Wellbeing, Housing and Local Council Ministry officer involving a RM34 million project to upgrade a thermal oxidation plant in which an agreement had been reached with a company, Syarikat Chain Cycle Sdn Bhd, without the ministry's knowledge; and

FALSE claims made by Telekom Malaysia to the Information, Communications and Culture Ministry between 2007 and 2012 for costs totalling RM7.56 million under the Malaysian Emergency Response Services 999 project, even though the project had been terminated.

Ali said the MACC had recommended that some of the cases be brought to court while others would involve disciplinary action against errant officers.

The MACC, he said, identified 24 cases of misconduct and negligence involving 140 civil servants.

Of the number, disciplinary and surcharge proceedings had been initiated against 12 officers, 99 faced disciplinary proceedings while 29 others faced surcharge proceedings.

Among them were:

67 Royal Malaysian Police staff involved in a case of missing assets;

41 Education Ministry officers involved in a number of cases, including the hiring of unqualified security guards at schools and mismanagement of school projects; and

19 Health Ministry officers for several cases, including acquisition of pipes without a formal contract and pipes that had not been officially approved.

As of Feb 21, Ali said the various disciplinary boards found two officers not guilty of any wrongdoing while 18 others would face punishment, including suspension of wage increments for up to 18 months.

He said 378 reprimand orders had been issued, of which 111 (29 per cent) were made to the civil service at the Federal level, 38 (10 per cent) to statutory bodies and 229 (61 per cent) at state level.

"A total of 261 (71 per cent) involved improvements to regulations, procedures and processes, all of which have been or are being looked into by the relevant agencies.

"Meanwhile, 111 (29 per cent) were made with regard to 121 cases of misappropriation of funds, abuse of power, misconduct and negligence."

NEW STRAITS TIMES

Thursday, March 6, 2014

2. Heavier penalties sought for illegal cigarette trade

KUALA LUMPUR: The Customs Department is asking the courts to mete out harsher sentences to those found guilty of buying and selling contraband cigarettes.

It wants nothing less than for the culprits who had been costing the government some RM2 billion in tax revenue to be sent to prison.

Director-general of Customs Datuk Seri Khazali Ahmad said this would greatly help in breaking the chain of supply of illicit cigarettes in the country.

Between 2010 and March this year, only seven people had been put in prison after the courts found them guilty under the Customs Act.

They included three each in Selangor and Negri Sembilan. Those convicted were mostly retailers, who were not licensed to sell cigarettes.

"We are asking the courts to remand and impose heavier sentences on anyone found to be involved in the contraband cigarette trade whether the cases are big or small.

"The penalty imposed under Section 135(1)(a) of the Customs Act 1967 will serve as a deterrent to those involved in this trade.

"The courts' decisions in these cases show just how serious the country is in reducing this illegal activity," he said in reference to the seven cases.

Khazali said there was a need to instil fear into those involved in the sale, purchase and distribution of illicit cigarettes.

He said the department's enforcers would also beef up their Op Outlet, which is aimed at tackling the smuggling of cigarettes and liquor into the country.

"Our operation is aimed at breaking the cycle because if no one is selling, there will be no buyers.

"We have set up 44 strike teams, comprising 200 officers, for this nationwide operation, including personnel roped in from the Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs Ministry. We will also be looking at all the ports and free-trade zones.

"Smokers may think that because the cigarette tax is high, contraband ones are a better option, but they fail to realise that the content could be more harmful to them."

A total of 752 people had been charged in court since the department initiated Op Outlet in February 2010. It had filed 6,440 cases involving RM59.05 million worth of illicit cigarettes.

"For every 100 cigarettes sold, 35 are illicit ones," he said at the launch of Op Outlet 2014 here, yesterday.

When asked on the possibility of Customs officers being in cahoots with smugglers and sellers of illicit cigarettes, Khazali said he welcomed information from those with proof.

The department collected RM3.5 billion in cigarette taxes last year. It would have collected RM5.5 billion if the illegal trade had been curtailed.

Cigarette tax contributed 11 per cent of the total RM33.126 billion in tax revenue collected by the department last year. It was the second biggest contributor to Customs' tax revenue after vehicles.

3. Private medical fees go up

PROTECTING THE PEOPLE: Health Ministry fixes ceiling rate at 14.4 per cent

PUTRAJAYA: THE Health Ministry has fixed the ceiling rate for the increase of private medical fee at 14.4 per cent.

Health Minister Datuk Seri Dr S. Subramaniam said the percentage was decided over the 30 per cent increase proposed by the Malaysian Medical Association.

"Those (in the fee schedule) are the maximum rates.

"What we have done is to protect the people from being overcharged by the private sector," he said after the ministry's post-cabinet meeting yesterday.

He said the ministry felt the increase of 14.4 per cent was more appropriate to form the basis for the increase in professional fees, which was lower than the 30 per cent suggested by MMA.

The revised 13th Schedule Fee Structure allows healthcare facilities to charge the stipulated maximum fee.

"However, the market force will determine the fees these facilities impose within the ambit of the schedule. Prudent and discerning public are encouraged to seek treatment at private (medical) facilities charging reasonable rates permitted by the recent amendments."

The minister said the 14.4 per cent increase was modest given that the inflation rate was around 23 per cent.

He said the fees for consultation and existing medical procedures had not been revised since its introduction in 2002.

The ministry, he said, was directed to review the fee schedule in September 2010.

There were reports on Monday that the amendment to the 13th Schedule of the Private Healthcare Facilities and Services Act 1998 (Private Hospitals and Other Private Healthcare Facilities) Regulations 2006 was published in the Federal Gazette on Dec 16 last year, and claimed it was implemented without sufficient publicity.

Dr Subramaniam, however, said the previous minister, Datuk Seri Liow Tiong Lai, had told the public of the increase in July 2012 based on news reports, and the fee schedule was brought to the cabinet in October that year.

"The increase of 14.4 per cent in professional fees, which was announced by the former health minister, was based on consumer price index of healthcare for the period of eight years, from 2002 to 2010.

"The decision was made after consulting ministries and stakeholders. The fee revision was approved by the cabinet on Oct 12, 2012."

It was reported that the new charge for a general practitioner consultation had jumped from between RM30 and RM125, as opposed to between RM10 and RM35 previously while a visit to a specialist would now cost up to RM235 for consultation alone, double the previous cap of RM125.

"Fees for medical procedures increased between 14 and 18 per cent.

Dr Subramaniam said a study had identified 10 high-sodium food Malaysians love to eat, which could raise the risk of hypertension, heart attack or stroke.

These include fish/prawn crackers; fish (fried/sauce); soy sauce; tomato and chili sauce; fried chicken; dried anchovies or cooked in sauce; fish cooked in curry or sauce; beef and mutton cooked in curry and chilli paste; fish and prawn balls as well as fried rice.

He said the Public Health Institute study also found that soy-based foods were major contributors to the high salt content.

"The study shows a worrying trend as the average intake of salt among Malaysian adults is 8.7g per day, which is 1.7 times higher than the World Health Organisation's recommendation of 5g per day.

"It also shows that men consume more salt than women," he said at a press conference in conjunction with the World Salt Awareness Week 2014 here yesterday.

The World Salt Awareness Week will be celebrated beginning next Monday with the theme "Stop, Look and Choose Low Salt".

On dengue cases, Dr Subramaniam said there were early indicators that the dengue cases were showing a stabilising trend.

For the past two weeks, there had been no spike in the number of cases, he said, adding that the ministry's relentless fight against dengue could be a contributing factor for the latest development.

4. Patients have right to be informed

KUALA LUMPUR: The Health Ministry yesterday stressed that patients have the right to be informed of the estimated charges before starting treatment following the fees increase.

Its director-general Datuk Dr Noor Hisham Abdullah said the average increase of 14.4 per cent in professional fees covered mainly procedural and performance fees.

"It was agreed after deliberation on the quantum imposed in relation to the services provided while taking into account the rental costs of facilities at different locations," he said in a statement.

"Under the Regulations of the Private Healthcare Facilities and Services Act 1998, patients have the right to be informed of the estimated charges prior to the initiation of care."

He said the duration of consultation may range from five minutes to an hour or so, depending on the cases and complexities, coupled with the variable level of expertise, competencies and different types of clinical examinations. It was noted the consultation fees was increased from a range of RM10 to RM35 to a new range of RM30 to RM125 for services with a general practitioner.

He said that the revision of the fees imposed in 2010 had taken into account the overall inflation rate and was based on the consumer price index specifically for healthcare for 2002 to 2010.

He also said the allowance was given to cap the upper or maximum range of one can be charged.

"This consultation fees are the range of chargeable fees with a ceiling rate specified to prevent overcharging by private practitioners."

The Malaysian Medical Association said the 14.4 per cent increase covered only consultation fees.

"This does not include the overall bill," MMA president Datuk Dr N.K.S. Tharmaseelan said.

He explained that the new price increase of 14.4 per cent would exclude treatment, drugs, lab fees and investigations.

"It does not cover the hospital charges which are unregulated thus far," he said, adding the surgical fees and procedures does not fall under the new schedule.

5. Fomca: Ministry should monitor fees

HEALTHCARE: Lack of enforcement among factors cited for cost hike

KUALA LUMPUR: THE Federation of Malaysian Consumers Association (Fomca) has urged the Health Ministry to closely monitor healthcare cost under the new stipulated medical fees that will see a 14.4 per cent rise.

Its secretary-general Datuk Paul Selvaraj said the ministry was responsible for ensuring private healthcare centres do not impose fees exceeding the range determined by the ministry.

"Often, what the minister has stated does not comply with what we see on the ground," he told the New Straits Times yesterday.

"There is an enforcement disconnect somewhere," he said, adding that another issue was transparency.

"Prices are often lumped together in one big figure and you can't separate what the charges are for," he said.

He stressed that the breakdown of costs should be made clear to patients before treatment so consumers can make a choice.

"Consumers should also have the freedom to purchase medicines at the pharmacy rather than having the medicine cost lumped in with consultation fees at clinics."

He said that it would be much cheaper to purchase medicines from pharmacies than to get them from clinics or hospitals.

"Medicine and consultation fees should be separated," he said, adding that the whole issue of healthcare cost is needed to be looked into.

"We are looking at a system where the rich go to private healthcare centres while the poor goes to public centres.

"There should be a system where there are affordable prices for all in the private institutions," he said, adding that the system should not allow maximisation of profits as healthcare was considered a human right.

The Malaysian Employers Federation which was unhappy with the price increase said it would be a burden to employers who will have to fork up more for their staff's medical expenses.

Its executive director Datuk Shamsuddin Bardan said employers would now have to raise their employee's health premium to meet the new medical fees.

"Currently employers offer insurance that is based on the old prices and this would sufficiently cover the costs when employees seek health treatments," he said.

He also expressed concern over the report in a local English daily that price increase had gone up to over 200 per cent.

"While the minister said the cap is only 14.4 per cent, the actual increase seems to be much more than that, some even reaching 257 per cent," he said, adding that the amendment to the Private Healthcare Facilities and Services Act 1998 was done in secrecy.

"There was no discussion with consumers and relevant parties. What the ministry has done is talk to the Malaysian Medical Council which was very interested in raising the cap."

He echoed Fomca's view that medicine should not be issued by doctors but bought separately by patients at pharmacies as it would cost less.

"Now doctors are profiting from prescribing medicines."

NEW STRAITS TIMES

Friday, March 7, 2014

6. 9 probe reports on audit sent back to MACC

LACK OF EVIDENCE: Gani recommends cases be closed

KUALA LUMPUR: NINE investigation papers related to the 2012 Auditor-General's Report have been returned by the Attorney-General's (A-G) Office to the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) with a recommendation that they be closed, said Attorney-General Tan Sri Abdul Gani Patail yesterday.

He said the papers were found to have insufficient evidence for a criminal charge against any officer or individual named.

"In some cases, it was observed that the misconduct or mismanagement of expenses raised in the report and investigated by MACC was a result of negligence by the officials and weaknesses in the administrative and financial procedures, and governance of the ministries, departments or agencies concerned.

"Therefore, improvements in procedures and governance, and recommended disciplinary action against the officers involved, have been proposed in some cases," he said in a statement.

Gani said seven other papers were returned to MACC with instructions to obtain additional information and supporting documents.

He said the additional information was needed before a final recommendation could be made, adding that charges in three of the investigation papers referred to were being considered by the department.

Gani said MACC had submitted the papers in phases from Nov 14 last year, with the latest batch received on Feb 14.

"The A-G's Office examined the investigation papers as soon as it received them. We also had regular discussions with MACC and its investigating officers."

Among the papers not received was the Dhua'fat housing assistance programme case, with some recipients not having application forms and whose incomes were above the poverty line.

Another was a case involving a RM14,385,332 tender for designing, building and certifying a training steel hull by Universiti Malaysia Terengganu, which did not follow specifications. Bernama

NEW STRAITS TIMES

Saturday, March 8, 2014

7. Reviewed PBS by month's end

EASING WORKLOAD: Programme to be faster and more teacher-friendly

ARAU: THE school-based assessment (PBS) programme that was put on hold last month will be reintroduced by the end of this month with lesser workload for teachers. Deputy Education Minister P. Kamalanathan assured teachers that the reviewed programme would be more teacher-friendly, with a faster and more efficient system aimed at reducing their workload.

He said the PBS "war room" in the ministry had been set up to address issues raised by teachers during a meeting with Deputy Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, who is also education minister, last month.

"We have received lots of feedback on the implementation of the PBS programme, both positive and negative."

Kamalanathan said the teachers' main complaint was that it took them hours to key in and submit students' data online.

"Sometimes, it takes them up to three hours to key in the students' data.

"This is mainly because of a weak Internet connection and server.

"We will make sure the system is beefed up before it is reintroduced."

He said this after attending a briefing session on the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 at the Universiti Malaysia Perlis (UniMAP) main campus yesterday.

Present were Education Performance and Delivery unit manager Dr Hayati Ismail and UniMAP vice-chancellor Professor Datuk Dr Kamarudin Hussin.

In his speech, Kamalanathan said the PBS programme was not a new one, as it had been proven to be successful in several countries.

Muhyiddin had, last month, announced that the programme had been put on hold.

He said this was to allow the ministry to review the system, following complaints from teachers.

The programme was implemented in 2011, starting with Year One pupils.

In 2012, it covered Form One students.

The programme is part of the government's efforts to produce well-rounded students.

Under the programme, teachers will grade schoolchildren every day.

The assessment will be based on a six-band spectrum, starting from band one, "understand" (the lowest), to band six, "exemplary" (the highest).

The data has to be entered daily into a centralised computer system, namely the School-Based Assessment Management System.

8. Teachers to see 80pc cut in workload, says DPM

KUALA LUMPUR: From April 1, teachers no longer have to go through the taxing task of keying in their students' learning progress and teaching data online.

Taking heed of the grievances and complaints from teachers, Deputy Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin said the School-based Assessment (PBS) had been fine-tuned and improved to reduce teachers' workload by between 70 and 80 per cent.

Muhyiddin, who is also education minister, announced the good news in a press conference at Parliament yesterday.

He also announced that the Penilaian Menengah Rendah (PMR) examination would be replaced by the Form 3 Assessment (PT3) system starting this year.

Under PT3, schools will be given the flexibility to administer, assess and award scores according to the standardised scoring guidelines set by the Examinations Board.

With the fine-tuning of PBS, Muhyiddin said teachers could now focus more on the teaching and learning process in classrooms. By keeping the data offline, this will reduce teachers' workload significantly, he said.

"It has been pointed out that it was burdensome for teachers to key in all important data, including proof and descriptors, into a central system.

"Now, this is not necessary, as the data that the teachers have can be kept by them in their own systems, without them having to key in those details into the central system.

"This can be done at their own time, given the situation and suitability."

PBS is a transformation of the focus from examination to a more holistic education evaluation system.

Since last year, teachers had complained that the task of keying in the data online was burdensome, aggravated by frequent breakdowns of the computer system. Teachers can evaluate students' learning abilities and developments based on their own observations under the Students' Education Development Guide.

They are no longer required to prepare the Students' Progress File and Transit Record. Instead, they can do so in their own time.

"For parents who wish to know the performance of their children, schools can prepare a performance report by holding monthly tests, mid-year examinations or final-year examinations," said Muhyiddin.

The cabinet had decided, on Dec 17, 2010, to introduce school-based assessments as part of the education transformation programme, with its implementation starting in 2011 for primary schools and 2012 in secondary schools. On Feb 11 this year, it was reviewed following numerous complaints.

Muhyiddin said a circular would be distributed to all schools, adding that if teachers required training on the new system, short courses would be conducted for them.

"We hope this will lessen the burden on teachers and help them focus on quality teaching."

Briefing sessions on the fine-tuned PBS concept and implementation will be held at state education departments and district education offices.

NEW STRAITS TIMES

Monday, March 24, 2014

9. Illegal cigarettes getting popular

IN JEOPARDY: Sin tax rise fails to prevent smoking

ALOR STAR: THE government's bid to contain smoking by raising the sin tax for tobacco products since last September is being jeopardised by illicit cigarette sale.

Sold at a fraction of the market price, for as low as RM3 per pack, the contraband are getting increasingly popular as normal cigarettes are priced between RM10 and RM12 per pack.

Despite a nationwide crackdown, the sale of illicit cigarettes was still rampant, especially in rural areas.

Many smokers, especially low-income earners and even middle-income earners, had switched from the premium or lower brands to kretek (clove cigarettes) and other illicit cigarettes brands.

What is more worrying is that the availability of illicit cigarettes is encouraging students to pick up the bad habit at a young age.

Checks by the New Straits Times revealed a number of male students from a secondary school in Kubang Rotan rushed to a sundry shop located across the school immediately after the school sessions to fulfil their nicotine addiction.

During a stakeout, the young smokers walked into the shop, located just 20m across the school, and bought the illicit cigarettes while in school uniform.

These students lit up the cigarettes in front of the shop, without bothering that they might be caught by teachers.

A Form 1 student, who was smoking in a group of five near the shop, said he started smoking at the age of 12.

A nearby resident, known only as Ahmad, revealed most shop owners selling illicit cigarettes sourced their supply from middlemen or smugglers during the early hours to avoid detection by law enforcers.

He said the contraband would be stocked up on their premises or illegal storage places and only a few cartons of each brand would be kept in the store, depending on the demand.