

03/01/1997

100 lose container homes in fire

Noor Adzman Baharuddin

PRAI, Thurs. - About 100 people were made homeless after their container homes were destroyed by fire in Seberang Jaya early today.

The victims, comprising 13 families, said they heard an explosion before the fire gutted their homes just past midnight.

Most of them were squatters from the nearby Kampung Telok who had been moved to the area in 1995 by Penas Holdings which is developing the former squatter site into a multi-billion ringgit township.

The developer, before embarking on the project, had arranged for them to put up in a row of double-storey container homes until some permanent site was found for them. The zinc-roofed containers, with metal walls and plywood flooring, had been modified with stairs leading to the first floor.

There was, however, no casualty in the fire which is believed to have been caused by faulty wiring.

Twenty-three firemen in three engines took about 10 minutes to stop the fire from spreading to the other containers.

Factory supervisor Thachanamuthi Vellu, 41, said he heard an explosion before hearing someone shouting that a fire had broken out.

"I rushed out of my container with my wife, paralysed father and four children. I saw the fire spreading fast to other containers," he said, adding that he lost property worth about RM55,000.

Thachanamuthi's 68-year-old father Santhan, who is paralysed from the waist down, said he dragged two of his grandchildren, who were sleeping, to safety as soon as he realised the row of 18 double-storey container homes were on fire.

"We could not re-enter the house to save our personal belongings because the fire was spreading very fast.

"Everything, including my granddaughter's Penilaian Menengah Rendah certificate and other important documents, were lost in the blaze," he said.

When going through the rubble with his granddaughter Sandamalar later, Santhan only managed to retrieve an intact framed picture of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

His youngest son, construction worker Gopalakrishnan, 31, said he lost his RM3,000 bonus payment in the fire.

"My employer gave the bonus late yesterday afternoon and I did not have time to bank it in.

"I had kept it on the altar."

Gopalakrishnan's older sibling, Murali, claimed the firemen were slow in responding to his telephone call.

"The person who answered my call kept asking for my address and telephone number and the firemen came about 45 minutes later," he said.

Meanwhile, Nirmala Devi, 23, and her 33-year-old husband, Manimaran Maruthamuthu, said they thought the police were conducting house-to-house checks when they heard loud knocks on their door and banging on the walls of the containers, alerting them to the fire.

"We got up only to find the middle containers were on fire and that it was spreading very fast."

State Health, Welfare and Caring Society Committee chairman Dr K. Rajapathy said Government agencies, including the State Welfare Services Department, would provide aid to the homeless.

"Penas will also provide alternative housing as soon as possible.

"We will also help the victims get replacement for any important documents lost in the fire help schoolgoing children before the school opens on Monday," he said.

He said the victims were also entitled to cash aid from the Yang di-Pertua Negeri's disaster relief fund.

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