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Beware of 'middlemen' civil servants, ACA warns (HL)

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KUALA LUMPUR, Sat. - Heads of government department have been advised to take a serious view of the presence of "middlemen" in their ranks as it would only encourage graft in transactions between the private sector and the Government.

Anti-Corruption Agency director-general Datuk Shafee Yahaya gave the advice following the arrest last year of 31 such "middlemen" - nine government officers and 22 members of the public.

While he did not disclose details of the cases, or reveal if any of them had been charged in court, he wanted department heads to exercise greater vigilance over the staff especially those having close contacts with the public.

He said: "Heads of department must be wary of their officers, who may seemingly be aiding the public, but actually peddling their superiors' names to ask for money from the public and private sector."

Apart from bringing the full weight of the newly enforced Anti-Corruption Agency Act 1997 on the middlemen, Shafee proposed to take the matter a step further.

"I will refer the matter for the attention of the management integrity committees which were set up following a directive by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad early this year."

The committees, which are headed by director-generals and secretaries-general, were set up with the aim of identifying weaknesses in their procedures which could lead to corruption.

In a Press statement today, Shafee said under the new Act, the middlemen would receive the same punishment as the bribe giver or taker.

This, he said, was to underscore how the law regarded their actions as equally devastating to the integrity and efficiency of the government administrative machinery.

"They will face the mandatory prison term of 14 days or up to a maximum of 20 years, and a minimum fine of RM10,000 or five times the value of the bribe, whichever is higher," he said.

He believed the services of the middlemen were in demand because of the intense competition by individuals and companies to obtain fast approvals for their permits or licences.

"In principle, the engagement of agents is not wrong under the law, if the service provided did not contravene the regulations and laws of the country," said Shafee.

Unfortunately, he said, there are individuals and companies who overzealously sought special treatment from the authorities for their projects.

"These individuals and companies would seek the middlemen, who would give them what they want, usually with bribery being involved.

"We take a serious view of such activities as it will only encourage graft in transactions between the private and public sectors," he said.

Shafee said there should not be any need for the middlemen if the spirit of Malaysia Incorporated was practised faithfully by government officers.

In this context, the ACA advised the public and private sectors to avoid using middlemen or consultancy firms that demand coffee money to "smoothen" their dealings with government agencies.

"Those who have been asked to cough out money to speed up approvals for their permits or licences should report to the ACA as soon as possible,"

he said.

(END)