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New Prisons chief to make the most of short tenure

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NEWLY-appointed Prisons director-general Commissioner Omar Mohamed Dan will perhaps be the last of the post-independence top brass to serve the department. Realising this, Omar, 54, who is due to retire at the end of the year after 28 years of service, has set upon himself the task of grooming a new generation of prison officers to lead the department's administration and operations.

"It's a different ball game now. There is more demand placed on warders to handle inmates, who are no longer considered lumps of useless flesh.

"There is greater emphasis on the welfare of inmates and the utilisation of their manpower," Omar said.

Although Omar has made it to the helm of the department, he does not intend to rest on his laurels.

Omar knows that he has less than a year to impress upon his peers that he and his officers are capable of delivering the goods, following the eight-year "clean up" of the troubled department.

Omar told The New Sunday Times in his first interview after being promoted as the deputy director-general to succeed retired Police Commissioner Datuk Zaman Khan on Dec 30, that he intends to go out credibly.

"All eyes are on me and my officers now that the department is directly under the jurisdiction of Prisons staff.

"We have to do justice upon the trust placed on us by the government so that public confidence is fully restored in the rehabilitation of prisons," said Omar.

He feels that the task is not impossible as the black sheep within the department had been weeded out or changed for the better.

Unlike his two predecessors Datuk Yassin Jaafar and Zaman, Omar comes with vast experience in the administration of prisons.

The career officer has seen the good and the ugly side of the department, having served in various capacities and penitentiary institutions, including the feared Pudu Prison and the penal island of Pulau Jerejak, both of which have now ceased operations.

Omar, born on Oct 16, 1943 in Tanjung Piandang, Perak, joined the department as a junior officer on July 1, 1970 after completing his Higher School Certificate examination.

He served in various capacities before being appointed Penang Prisons director in 1989 and Kuala Lumpur Prisons director (based in the now closed Pudu Prison) in 1993.

He was made deputy director-general in October 1995, succeeding Yusof Mohammad Nor, who retired after 35 years of service. Married to Fatimah Mohamad, Omar was bestowed the Pingat Jasa Kebaktian and Ahli Mangku Negara, both in 1992, and the Kesatria Mangku Negara in 1996.

For the record, Omar is the ninth director-general.

The first three were British officers - Capt E.S. Lilley who served from April 1, 1946 to Sept 11, 1949, followed by Capt O.V. Garrett (Sept 11, 1949-Oct 1, 1956) and Flt Lt W.B. Oliver (Oct 1, 1956-Oct 2, 1957) before Tan Sri Murad Ahmad became the first local to helm the department on Oct 3, 1957.

Murad retired almost 20 years later on July 24, 1977 and was succeeded by Datuk Ibrahim Mohamed (July 25, 1977-April 4, 1988), followed by Datuk Nik Ariffin Nik Omar (May 1, 1988-Nov 7, 1989).

However, the appointment of the seventh director-general waived tradition when the then Federal police Public Order and Internal Security director Yassin filled the post on March 1, 1990.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who is also Home Minister and Police Services Commission chairman, had seconded Yassin to the prisons helm in the wake of public outrage over a spate of jailbreaks, allegations of dadah trafficking among prison officers and cases of prisoners being given preferential treatment.

Former Federal police Criminal Investigation Department director Zaman, who succeeded Yassin, continued the "cleaning up" of the troubled department for another four years until the Home Ministry was satisfied that the post of director-general should revert to an officer from within the Prisons' ranks.

As for the future, Omar said that a majority of senior Prisons officers were due to end their tour of duty by the year 2000.

"A new breed of junior officers, who are academically better qualified, are expected to fill the vacant posts. These will be the new generation and the future of the department," he said.

Keeping to tradition, Omar's present deputy, Deputy Commissioner Mustafa Osman, 44, is expected to succeed him at the helm.

If that happens and if Mustafa completes the full length, he would have served the department a good 29 years, 11 years of which as director-general.

Mustafa, who is an arts graduate from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, previously worked as an assistant manager with a private firm before joining the department as a deputy superintendent in 1980.

In view of the economic downturn, Omar said that among his priorities over the next six months were to develop prison-based industries into an enterprise to help jails to be self-financing and less dependent on government allocations.

Omar's task is to spell out the department's cost-saving measures, by modernising prison-based industries, including buying new machines and introducing the latest approach in skills training.

Presently, inmates have been churning out products such as furniture, handicrafts, paintings, clothings and carpets for sale to the public.

The inmates also provide, among others, automotive and electrical maintenance, cooking, tailoring, laundry, gardening, cleaning, library services and general labour internally within the prisons.

"The idea is to turn these small-scale businesses into large enterprises which can reap income for the department, staff and the inmates themselves.

"By doing so, we can reduce operating expenditure and become less-dependent on governmental allocations," said Omar.

The department had long recognised that the 25,000-odd inmates serving in the 37 prison institutions nationwide were a good source of manpower, just like the prison staff whose knowledge and talents are optimised to serve the various units in the department.

"By tapping their skills and grooming them further, we can make entrepreneurs out of them," Omar said.

To make the plan effective, Omar would, among other things, propose for the designation of marketing officers from among prison staff to boost sales of products and services of inmates, and carry out business development for new ones.

"We also wish to establish closer rapport with the private sector to market the products and services through joint ventures, so as to be more competitive while providing quality products and services," he added.

Statistics show that prison-based industries contributed a turnover of

RM4.527 million in 1996, as compared with RM3.354 million the previous year and RM2.614 million in 1994.

Under the approved entrepreneur scheme, Omar said, the government gets 50 per cent of the income from prison-based industries, the inmates 40 per cent and the remainder goes to a welfare trust fund for prison staff and inmates.

"Money from this trust fund is used to improve the messing and living conditions of inmates," said Omar.

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