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Fear, apathy keep witnesses away

A. Kadir Jasin

ON Tuesday several newspapers highlighted Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's statement that the Government is prepared to consider introducing a law to protect witnesses to crimes.

He was quoted as saying that it is time to introduce such a legislation to protect witnesses as many of them were threatened or were afraid to come forward.

This, said the Prime Minister, had resulted in many criminals going free. He was speaking to reporters after opening a conference of police commissioners, chief police officers, commanders and commandants in Shah Alam a day earlier.

Naturally, the first to welcome the Prime Minister's statement was the Inspector-General of Police, Tan Sri Norian Mai.

With the threats of crime, both in terms of severity and complexity, being on the rise, a comprehensive witness protection law is needed. In some countries, witnesses to crimes, in particular those committed by organised gangs, are given new identities and life-long government protection.

We may want to consider some aspects of witness protection laws and schemes already in operation around the world.

The Sun newspaper's treatment of the report is most interesting. It used the story as its main report headlined "Law to protect witnesses" with the sub-heading "PM: Crooks go free as public are afraid to help police."

The fact that a lot of people are afraid to come forward is an understatement. A lot of them simply do not want to come forward. There is as much fear as there is apathy.

More so when the crimes implicate members of the police force. The reluctance of the public to get involved is totally understandable. The risk is far too great for an individual to take.

It is for this reason that the police must continue to separate the good cops from the bad ones. Sadly today, a lot of people think they can no longer make this distinction. Some just don't bother any more. They simply do not want to have anything to do with the police, if they can.