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Outrage over UM blaze (HL)

KUALA LUMPUR, Sat. - More angry voices and calls for punitive action were heard today as more people expressed outrage over the fire which destroyed Universiti Malaya's Dewan Tunku Canselor.

If arson was indeed the cause of yesterday's fire, these voices demanded very strong action be taken to deter similar acts.

Police began questioning students and others on the campus while Universiti Malaya vice-chancellor Datuk Anuar Zaini Mohd Zain issued a strong warning to those who might be involved.

There would be no "mercy" for staff or students if investigations showed that they were responsible for the fire, he said. "They will most likely be expelled or sacked," Anuar Zaini said.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who will go to the campus tomorrow for the closing ceremony of "Simposium Penegasan Arah Tuju Idealisme Mahasiswa Di Alaf Baru", said he would not be deterred from going.

Asked if he would attend despite leaflets urging him not to and flyers calling the campus population to boycott his visit, Dr Mahathir said:

"I will go... the university does not belong to them alone. I also have a right because if not for our efforts, they will not be able to study there... so don't think UM belongs to them."

Anuar Zaini warned students, administrative staff and lecturers of the university not to get involved in attempts to prevent Dr Mahathir from attending the symposium.

Umno Youth chief Datuk Hishammuddin Tun Hussein urged the university's senate to take full responsibility over the incident.

He said several past incidents in the university, such as the publication of the Varsiti 2001 magazine (featuring anti-government articles) and the widespread distribution of flyers condemning the Government proved that an anti-government student movement existed in the university.

"If this kind of menace is not addressed urgently it might spread in the campus and other students could be influenced and possibly roped into some militant activities," Hishammuddin said in a statement, adding that the university senate must take this matter very seriously and investigate the incident until those responsible were identified.

In Alor Star, Umno Youth information chief Azimi Daim joined Puteri Umno in calling for Anuar Zaini's resignation over what he said were "clear weaknesses in the administration, management and security in the university".

In a separate statement, the university said it was too early to draw any conclusions on the cause of the fire. Its public relations head, Wan Mazni Woojdy, said the fire was still under investigation. "It is therefore premature and inappropriate for any party to draw conclusions on the cause of the incident."

The fire early yesterday gutted the building's interior, with damage estimated at RM12.4 million.

Some 1,800 graduation robes and 2,000 mortar boards to be used in next month's convocation ceremony were also destroyed.

In Kuala Klawang, Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Dr Rais Yatim said he had directed prosecuting officials to liaise with the police in their investigations.

"I have asked them to look into the police report and act accordingly if the fire was due to arson."

He said stern action should be taken against students found to be involved in politics and that the Universities and University Colleges Act 1975 should be reviewed for full enforcement of the Act to prevent a recurrence.

Although the Government banned students from getting involved in politics, some political parties did not heed the directive and were actively doing this through cultural, social and religious activities.

In Kuantan, Pahang Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Adnan Yaakob said students found involved in militant activities should be severely dealt with. He said students should remember that they went to universities to study and not take part in wild activities.

He said students sponsored by the Pahang Foundation found involved in such activities would have their scholarships or study loans withdrawn immediately.

In Ipoh, National Higher Education Fund Board chairman Datuk Husni Hanadzlah warned all of its loan recipients that their loan facility would be revoked if they were found to be involved in "militant" activities. The warning was the first to be issued by the board.

He said it was to ensure that students did not resort to activities detrimental to the country, their welfare or the institutions they were in. Under the agreement they signed with the NHEF, it was stipulated that students must adhere to regulations, one of which was not to participate in political organisations, unions or bodies not related to the university.

"If they are found guilty of any such activity, their loans will be revoked and they will be required to pay back whatever amount they have used, including administrative cost, within 30 days," he said.

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