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Legislation to ensure better protection for crime witnesses

Fay Angela D'cruz

KUALA LUMPUR, Tues. - Draft legislation to ensure witnesses to crime are better protected is in its final stages. This proposed law will allow persons to assume new names and resettle in different parts of the country.

The law, which is similar to those found in developed nations, would provide for the establishment of a comprehensive witness protection programme.

Currently, witnesses are protected by the police but they cannot assume new identities and have to move to new areas on their own accord.

Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Dr Rais Yatim in confirming this, said work on the legislation began in April which included gathering information and feedback from the relevant authorities.

"The formulation of the new Act would result in amending the Evidence Act and Criminal Procedure Code," he said.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad had early this year said that there had been cases where witnesses were threatened with dire consequences.

"I think witnesses can be protected," he had said, citing several examples of murder cases being unsolved because people were not forthcoming with information or testimony for fear of their lives.

It is learnt that under the witness protection programme, the Attorney-General's chambers can recommend that potential witness or members of the family of potential witnesses be placed under the programme.

Recently, there have been several cases of witness tampering and threats against those who lodge police reports.

In September this year, P. Mallika, 26, told the Press she feared for the safety of her family and herself after her husband, R.A. John Iruthayanathan, was murdered.

Mallika, who was five months' pregnant with her fifth child, had lodged a police report in July that her eight-year-old daughter was abducted and raped. However, the gangsters managed to locate her, broke into her home and assaulted her and the children for failing to withdraw the police report.

Pemadam vice-president Datuk Lee Lam Thye said a new legislation to protect eyewitnesses was necessary as it would make the people feel safe when offering information or lodging police reports.

\* news@nstp.com.my

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