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UTM fire: `It's sabotage'

Carol Murugiah

SKUDAI, Sat. - The fire which damaged part of Universiti Teknologi Malaysia's Dewan Sultan Iskandar is believed to be an act of sabotage, Vice-Chancellor Prof Datuk Mohd Zulkifli Mohd Ghazali said today.

He said the university's investigations indicated that the fire started at two or three places on the stage.

Although police investigations pointed to a short-circuit, Mohd Zulkifli said this was unlikely as the fire started between 11pm on Thursday and 2am on Friday when electricity consumption in the building was low.

He told a Press conference at UTM that the university's electrical engineers and experts had conducted their own investigations, and their findings had been submitted to Education Minister Tan Sri Musa Mohamad.

He also said if arson was confirmed, it was most likely prompted by UTM's tough stand against lecturers, staff and students involved in militant activities and anti-government propaganda.

UTM lecturers Roshelmy Md Sharif, Idris Salim and Dr Abdullah Daud were among 23 who have been detained for alleged involvement in Kumpulan Militan Malaysia.

A second-year Management and Human Resources student was also arrested by police in January for allegedly trying to sabotage the Barisan Nasional's Indera Kayangan by-election campaign.

The university had suspended the three lecturers, but had not decided on the action to be taken against the student.

Mohd Zulkifli maintained that the university had to come down hard on lecturers and students found involved in such activities.

"We do not tolerate any indiscipline especially in respect of anti-Government sentiments and lecturers inciting students to rebel. Lecturers have to conduct themselves with proper decorum and behaviour," he said.

The staff only discovered the fire on Friday morning when the hall was found to be flooded with water from the sprinkler system which had doused the flames.

"Our initial investigations indicate that the fire started from two or three different places on the stage. It destroyed mainly the curtains and some stage equipment, causing losses amounting to RM200,000.

"Fortunately, the damage was limited by the sprinkler system which managed to douse the flames before it could spread to other parts of the building."

The blaze occurred just as the university was preparing to hold several major events at the hall next week.

The Vice-Chancellor said the damage would be repaired in time for both occasions.

The UTM fire comes less than a year after the June 29 pre-dawn fire which destroyed Universiti Malaya's Dewan Tunku Canselor just two days before Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad was scheduled to give a speech there.

Mohd Zulkifli said security has since been beefed up at the UTM hall, administration centre and library to prevent similar occurrences.

The police, Fire and Rescue Department and Chemistry Department are also conducting detailed investigations into the blaze.

Meanwhile, State Criminal Investigation Department chief Senior Assistant Commissioner (II) Tan Seng Eng said investigations were on-going although a short circuit had been initially suspected.

carolm@nstp.com.my

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