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Last chance for land offices

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BY now, many of us should be aware that Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi made a "wake up call" to all land offices by telling them to buck up.

This of course was in December last year, hardly two months after he took over from his predecessor, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad. Now, one month later, a close look at the land office in your neighbourhood should tell you right away whether the PM's call has been well-received or has fallen on deaf ears.

It was after the 59th National Land Council meeting that Abdullah made his important announcement regarding the land administration system in this country.

On Friday, Dec 19, all the local dailies quoted Abdullah as saying the Land and Co-operative Development Ministry had been asked to set up a special task force to help clear the backlog in the land and district offices throughout the country.

He stressed that being an essential part of the Government's delivery system, land offices must be more efficient so that they would facilitate, rather than impede, national development.

Abdullah did not give exact details of the backlog, but admitted that the task force would have "a lot of work on its hands".

The general speculation is that the transaction backlog numbers as much as several million. The task force will be asked to concentrate on this, while existing staff will handle the day-to-day matters, the Prime Minister added.

We are told that 30 teams or more will be set up and that they would be moving from one location to another to clear the backlog.

A clue as to the amount of work involved was provided by the Johor Bar Committee, which was quoted as saying that there are as many as 180,000 land titles still pending registration at the State's land offices. The distressing part of the matter is that the figure only represents cases pending since March 2001.

The setting up of the task force is apparently the immediate and short term answer to the problem. The final and long-term solution, said Abdullah, is for all the land offices in the country to be completely overhauled and restructured. This would be left to the Chief Secretary to the Government, Tan Sri Samsudin Osman, to work on.

"He is personally looking into it and has promised me that it would be ready by the end of the first quarter of next year (2004)," Abdullah said last month.

Asked by reporters whether he could foresee any problems with the State Governments (since land matters are within their jurisdiction), Abdullah said all the mentris besar and chief ministers "have agreed to co-operate because they see it as beneficial".

I sincerely hope that what the State menteris besar and chief ministers have agreed on will be honoured by all the officials down the line.

Apart from the task force deployed at state-level, district land offices would also be setting up "special committees" comprising representatives from relevant Government departments. These committees would be empowered to approve land-related applications.

In the future, there would be no need to refer these applications to State Executive Councils as the special committees would operate as

"one-stop centres" for land applications.

I am not sure whether this move requires any amendments to the National Land Code, 1965. We have to get more details of the new system before we can form any opinion on it.

Meanwhile, Land and Co-operative Development Ministry secretary-general Datuk Yidris Abdullah was quoted as saying that much of the backlog was in "fast developing states" such as Johor, Selangor, Malacca and Penang.

As such, the task force would first focus its attention on these areas before moving on to the other states. Another factor that led to the backlog is the change-over from the manual system to the computerised land registration system.

"Once we clear this backlog, the system should run smoothly," he said.

I hope Yidris will be proven right. Personally speaking, I have my misgivings. I was recently told by a friend (whose services have been engaged by a certain state authority to facilitate this change-over) that a full revamp from the manual to the computerised land registration system in all states will take a few more years to be completed.

We are now in January 2004 and the clock is ticking. In a couple of months' time, we hopefully will be told the details of the "final solution" which the Chief Secretary to the Government is working on. Soon thereafter, we should see the birth of the new structure of our land administration system, and hopefully, in due course, the backlog becoming a thing of the past.

As my late religious teacher used to say, "Where there is life, there is still hope".

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