

PM: 18 VVIP graft cases hit brickwall
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Lack of evidence and testimonials from witnesses have hampered the investigations into 18 high-profile corruption cases, said Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi today.

Abdullah, in a written reply in the Parliament, said these two factors resulted in the Attorney-General's Chambers not being able to make any headway in these cases.

He, however, did not explain how the problem could be overcome.

In 2004, the government announced that it would crack down on high-profile corruption cases, indicating that at least 18 senior government officials were implicated.

Thus far only former Land and Cooperative Development Minister Kasitah Gaddam has been brought to trial for corruption charges.

Abdullah's written response was to a question by Karpal Singh (DAP-Bukit Gelugor) who had asked if there had been any action taken on the high-profile cases over the past three years.

Karpal had also wanted to know if the government was willing to form an investigative or legislative body to prosecute these cases.

"Generally, several factors contribute to the failure to prosecute, whether it is high profile or otherwise," answered Abdullah.

He said weaknesses had been identified in the investigation of the cases and these involved the taking of statements and obtaining evidence.

Abdullah added that the key witnesses have either "disappeared or are unable to be located".

"The Attorney General's Chambers carries a heavy responsibility when preparing a criminal case. In addition, the AG is responsible to check on all facts presented to him by the investigative agency," he said.

"Only when the AG is satisfied that statements collected are enough and solid in proving that a crime has been committed, only then prosecution could proceed in court."

High ratio of convictions

The prime minister also said that of 325 cases in the High Court last year, the prosecutors have been able to get an indictment for 241 of the cases, or a 74.1 percent success rate.

Meanwhile, of the 896 cases in the Sessions Court, the prosecutors had been able to get an indictment for 644 cases, or 86.1 percent.

He also said that there was a lack of skilled attorneys who were able to handle the prosecution of corruption cases.

To overcome this, Abdullah indicated that three measures were undertaken to improve the prosecutors' office:

1. The setting up of a task force in the AG's Chambers that make up of experienced officers to assist the deputy prosecutors.
2. Continuous training for deputy prosecutors to upgrade their skills in the fields of DNA analysis, narcotics, surgery, terrorist, cross-border crime and commercial crime. The training would be conducted in Thailand, United Kingdom and the United States.
3. 'Virtual training' with the Crown Prosecution Service, UK and continued legal training with the University of Nottingham Trent (UK) and the University of Wollongong, Australia.

The prime minister also said further steps were being taken to improve the investigation of cases by the police through courses on commercial crime, sex crimes, cyber crime and forensics training.

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