

# Tourism Ministry can't act, says Lim

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KUALA LUMPUR: The Tourism Ministry has no jurisdiction over the powers of state religious departments because they fall under the Prime Minister's Department.

Commenting on a case where a non-Muslim American couple holidaying in Langkawi were terrorised in the middle of the night last month by a Langkawi Islamic Affairs Department team that wanted to catch them for *khalwat*, Deputy Tourism Minister Datuk Donald Lim Siang Chai said it was up to the religious department whether it would explain the incident to the ministry.

Asked if the ministry would work with the department to prevent such incidents, he said: "We cannot because there is a minister in the Prime Minister's Department who gives the order to me religious

department.

"We hope the department will issue a statement to explain to us. But we also understand that they have the prerogative (over this) and we cannot comment on it."

The retired American couple, Randall Barnhart, 62, and his wife, Carole, 61, said they were rudely awakened at 2am in the Oct 14 incident at their rented condominium by an aggressive team that demanded to see their marriage certificate.

Barnhart met with Lim and ministry secretary general Datuk Dr Victor Wee recently. Lim said Barnhart told them he and his wife would continue to visit Malaysia despite the incident.

"He said they would deal with the religious department separately, so the ministry will leave the matter to them as it is an isolated case and has nothing to do with government policy," Lim said yesterday after

'launching the rebranding of *Go Genting Express*.

Kedah state secretary Datuk Syed Unan Mashni Syed Abdullah was quoted in a news report last week that there were no plans to take disciplinary action against the six officers involved in the raid. It was also reported that the cabinet would be briefed on the incident.

On another matter, Lim said the government aimed to attract more than 20 million tourists during Visit Malaysia Year 2007, and hoped to generate RM44.5 billion in revenue.

He said local authorities have been told to maintain roads especially in tourist spots.

Lim said there were currently a total of 2,269 hotels in the country, and the government expected next year's occupancy rate to be higher than this year's 65.5%.

"For hotels that do not meet the standard, their star ranking will be downgraded," he said.