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Division heads to be accountable

FOOLPROOF PROCESS: NKRA anti-corruption division mulls criminalising mismanagement by ministry officials

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SECRETARIES-GENERAL could soon be forced to assume greater accountability for misdeeds within their ministry.

In a move to stop shoddy management of funds and expenses that had resulted in millions of ringgit being flushed down the drain, the National Key Results Area (NKRA) anti-corruption division is considering criminalising mismanagement of funds or poor judgment by ministry officials.

The 24 secretaries-general running Putrajaya's 24 ministries were expected to know every minute detail, right down to the last bolt, related to their ministries, said its director Datuk Hisham Nordin.

To ensure a foolproof process in holding the officers accountable, an Integrity and Management Committee (Jawatankuasa Integriti dan Takbir Urus), or Jitu, will be set up in all ministries.

The nod for this had been given by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak, said Hisham.

"The ministers and secretaries-general will have to play a bigger role in identifying weaknesses within their administration. The secretaries-general must make sure they are in the loop of every

decision made by their officers," Hisham said.

"We are in the midst of finalising how far we want to hold them accountable, including prosecuting them for mismanagement."

"When questioned on matters related to their ministries, the secretaries-general must be able to answer the questions on the spot. This will show they know what exactly is going on in their backyard and that they are worthy of the position.

"Basically, the heads need to be strong and knowledgeable, especially when dealing with their officers. They have to know everything inside out."

Hisham said for starters, each of these committees would look into each ministry's administration and problem areas, and address issues that had been raised in the Auditor-General's Reports. They will help provide solutions.

He said an Integrity Unit would be formed to help the ministries resolve management issues plaguing them.

This unit would come with its own chief and audit head, who will serve to analyse the administration's management and report directly to the cabinet or Auditor-General, if necessary.

The unit would have full access to information and transactions re-



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lated to the ministry and its agencies to allow for close monitoring, as well as effective investigations.

"Jitu will enhance the power and management scope of the top civil servants who run the ministries. They will be more hands-on with their ministries' activities, management and progress.

"Jitu will be set up at the ministerial, state and national levels. The first two will be chaired by the minister or menteri besar and/or the chief minister, as well as the secretary-general or state secretary.

"If they fail to solve the problems at the ministerial level, the issues would be handled by Jitu at the national level."

He also said Datuk Paul Low, the Minister in the Prime Minister's Department who is in charge of

governance and integrity, would chair the national-level Jitu.

It is understood that the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) would also be part of the national-level committee.

"The punishment for government officers found to be responsible for poor judgment or wastage, even if it was an oversight, will be a deterrent," said Hisham.

"Administrative offences committed are punishable by a demotion or freezing of salary. If they commit graft, they will be handed to the MACC."

Hisham said civil servants found guilty would also face dismissal if the offence was grave.

"Government officers need to know that their decisions affect the country in many ways, including its economy. That is why NKRA wants administrative offences to be treated as a criminal act and offenders should be charged in court. The ultimate aim is for the country to start seeing a spotless Auditor-General's Report."

Low told the NST that the national-level committee he would be heading would emphasise on good governance and integrity.

"The ministers, secretaries-general and menteriis besar will be accountable for their ministry and state's management, including procurement, systems, decisions, monitoring projects, intervening when they should, as well as addressing issues highlighted in the Auditor-General's Report.

"They must be in the know, carry out checks and know everything that is happening within.

"The secretary-general, for instance, will have the responsibility equal to that of a chief executive officer of a company, while the minister's role is equivalent to that of the chairman of a corporation."

Low believed positive changes in the management of ministries would be visible in the next two months as the business of doing things was tweaked.

Works Minister Datuk Fadillah Yusof said his ministry had established the Integrity Unit and identified weaknesses.

He said the lack of manpower was a big issue for the ministry.

This problem, he said, affected the management of projects at national and district levels.

"The problem was not that we could not handle all the projects, the problem was that we just did not have enough personnel to handle them.

"Sometimes, when there are too many projects that have to be handled with our limited resources, things are overlooked.

"That is why we are looking at mobilising staff from other districts to help out in critical areas," he said, adding that this reshuffling of manpower included those in Johor who are handling 10 projects and Selangor which had 30 at the moment.

Fadillah said one project supervisor under the ministry would be overseeing five projects at a time.

"Together with the Integrity Unit, we are looking at ways to improve the current processes so that we can plug holes that could lead to power abuse and corruption."