

DAP wants parliamentary panel to oversee defence buys
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KUALA LUMPUR, Dec 6 — Establishing a bipartisan parliamentary oversight committee to monitor the Defence Ministry's expenditure is the only way to guarantee accountability and transparency, the DAP said today.

Its national publicity secretary Tony Pua said the "annual litany" of scandals and transgressions reported in the Auditor-General's Report was proof enough for an oversight panel.

Defence Minister Datuk Seri Zahid Hamidi said yesterday that Pakatan Rakyat (PR) scrutiny in defence deals was unnecessary as an Armed Forces joint committee provided the necessary transparency and evaluation.

"Such contemptuous arrogance towards parliamentary oversight over defence expenditure which amounts to tens of billions of ringgit annually has proven Transparency International (TI) right by scoring Malaysia at only 4.5 points out of a maximum of 12, or only 37.5 per cent, well below the failure mark," said Pua (picture), referring to TI's "Transparency of Defence Budgets Report" launched last month.

The Petaling Jaya Utara MP charged that Zahid's "disdain" towards "transparency and accountability" was reflected in his ministerial replies in Parliament.

Pua accused Zahid and his ministry of not being forthcoming in explaining "sizable" transactions and purchases.

"We call upon the government to honour the prime minister's Government Transformation Plan (GTP) which pledged for transparency and accountability by setting up the Parliament Select Committee on Defence, modelled after the United States House Oversight Subcommittee on National Security, Homeland Defence and Foreign Operations which looks after defence policies as well as the US Defence Budget Appropriation Committees which review and approve detailed defence expenditure," said Pua.

The Defence Ministry's expenditure has drawn intense interest from PR, which has continually sought explanations for the multi-billion ringgit defence deals involving the ministry.

The latest was a query as to why the ministry paid RM7.6 billion for armoured personnel carriers (APC) procured by DRB-Hicom Bhd for only US\$559 million (RM1.7 billion).

A RM6 billion contract for six offshore patrol vessels (OPVs) drew similar attention at the start of the year.

An embarrassing failure by one of the country's billion-ringgit Scorpene submarines to submerge last year attracted further reservations over the prudence of the country's defence spending.

While the government maintains that such contracts must be classified as a matter of

national security, PR has insisted that Malaysians have a right to know how public funds were being spent given the ministry's history of cost overruns.

Anti-graft watchdog Transparency International-Malaysia (TI-M) has also urged the government to stop to using national security as an excuse for the secrecy that ends up hiding graft involving defence contracts, and consider appointing independent monitors for such deals.

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