

Putrajaya not blind to 'alarming' rise in custodial deaths, says Paul Low
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BY CLARA CHOOI

KUALA LUMPUR, June 4 — The startling rise in custodial deaths has set off alarm bells in Putrajaya, Datuk Paul Low has said, offering his assurance that the government is determined to stop all future tragedies behind bars.

The minister in charge of integrity and corruption told The Malaysian Insider that despite the negative perception against the government, administrators and the Najib Cabinet are aware that "something needs to be done" before the death toll rises again on their watch.

"I can assure you that the government is very concerned with the alarming statistics and something has to be done.

"Do not think they are blind to what is out there. It is just that the process of government needs to find a solution to stop this," he said when contacted here.

The former Transparency International Malaysia (TI-M) president acknowledged the resounding call from opposition lawmakers for the setting up of the Independent Police Complaints and Misconduct Commission (IPCMC) but would not dive into the fray for now, noting that there are processes that must be adhered to within the confines of the government framework.

He pointed to the availability of other channels to deal with issues such as custodial deaths like the Enforcement Agency Integrity Commission (EAIC), an agency set up in 2011 that was given the power to probe complaints of misconduct against the police and 18 other authorities.

"But of course, definitely, the government will see the need for improvement. They are quite open to improvement... after all, they do want to ensure public safety," Low said.

The newly-minted minister, however, noted the government's struggle in battling with public perception, which stands today at an all-time low, particularly against the police.

He said such a negative perception against the police force, or any government agency for that matter, could not disappear easily unless the public feels confident that their administrators are not hiding the truth from them.

"You have to communicate the truth and be transparent, and be sincere in the actions that you are going to take," he said.

Admit that things need to be better. Take responsibility and then prove it through action. If you keep denying it, obviously people will look at it as a lame excuse by the government to not solve the problem. — Paul Low

Low added that the government should not be defensive about any mistakes or mishaps that have occurred by denying them without obtaining foolproof evidence, or they would stand to face an even more hostile public.

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you keep denying it, obviously people will look at it as a lame excuse by the government to not solve the problem," he said.

Next, Low said consistency was another key to improving public perception of the government and building up credibility.

"These three things — being truthful, stop being defensive and being consistent — this is what will help build credibility in the eyes of the public, I believe," he said.

The police force came under public ridicule and scrutiny again recently after it hit media headlines that the number of lock-up deaths this year had soared to a staggering seven.

The latest was the death of a detainee in Negri Sembilan, the third in a month, which fuelled calls from civil society leaders and opposition politicians to form the IPCMC.

P. Karuna Nithi, 43, was found unconscious by policemen on duty at around 6.30pm on Saturday at the Tampin police station lock-up and pronounced dead by paramedics from the Tampin hospital who arrived on the scene.

While the full results of a post-mortem have yet to be released, the state police chief appeared to clear his men of any potential blame when he told reporters there was no "criminal element" and the case has been classified as sudden death.

Karuna Nithi's death on the heels of N. Dharmendran, 32, who died just 11 days earlier on May 21 while under remand at the city police contingent headquarters here, has sparked greater public uproar and calls for the screws to be tightened on the police force.

A hospital autopsy report on Dharmendran revealed that he had died as a result of multiple beatings.

According to rights group Suaram, there were 218 cases of alleged deaths in custody in Malaysia from 2000 to this month, with its records showing that nine of those cases occurred in 2012, while five cases took place this year.

A United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention 2010 visit to Malaysian prisons and detention centres reported in 2011 that between 2003 and 2007, "over 1,500 people died while being held by authorities."

The Malaysian Bar, civil society groups and several politicians from both sides of the divide have called for the IPCMC to be implemented to reform the police force since 2006.

The IPCMC, which was mooted by a royal commission chaired by former Chief Justice Tun Mohamed Dzaiddin Abdullah but shot down by the police, was to be modelled on the United Kingdom's Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC), as well as other police oversight bodies in New South Wales and Queensland in Australia, and Hong Kong.

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