

# 211 religious schools burnt in two years

Study: Most of these centres lack fire safety awareness

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PETALING JAYA: Fire and Rescue Department records show that 211 fires have occurred at tahfiz schools nationwide between 2015 and 2017.

Prior to yesterday's fire in Baling, the latest incident was on May 7 when a tahfiz school in Sabak Bernam, built in 1984, was destroyed in an early morning fire. No one was hurt.

On Sept 29, 1989, global attention turned to Malaysia when 27 female students of SAR Taufikiah Al-Halimiah, Kampung Padang Lumat, Kedah, perished in their sleep when fire destroyed the school, including eight wooden hostels that were said to be fire-traps. The fire was believed to have been caused by a lighted candle.

Studies revealed that many fires that occurred at religious schools were due to a lack of awareness of fire safety and construction done without approval from the relevant authorities, including the Fire and Rescue Department.

In light of such incidents, the department launched the Tahfiz Fire Fighter Squads in Selangor, which will be expanded to other states by December, said a department source.

Urban Wellbeing, Housing and Local Government Minister Tan

Sri Noh Omar said recently that the number of fires at tahfiz and religious schools had increased yearly.

The first three months of this year saw fires occurring at some 30 tahfiz, pondok schools and madrasah, with losses of over RM1.4mil, he said.

The spate of fires at Islamic religious schools also prompted Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Ahmad Zahid Hamidi to ask the management of tahfiz schools to register with the state religious authorities.

Otherwise, it would be difficult for them to monitor and maintain various standards, including the safety of such schools.

A total of 519 tahfiz schools have been registered nationwide as of April this year.

The chief administrator of a tahfiz school in Pasir Mas, Nik Mahmud Nik Omar, claimed that tahfiz schools in Kelantan were set up without approval so that they could remain independent to ensure the source of financing for the institutions was halal (permissible).

"All we do is just inform the state religious department and it is enough for classes to be carried out," said Nik Mahmud, who has 25 students, aged seven to 18.

He, however, agreed that more needed to be done to prevent such places from becoming fire hazards.