

LEADER

Register or risk closure

While attention is on tahfiz schools, others must not slip under the radar

THE nation has heard the cry for help: it could not have been any louder than that which followed the blaze that claimed 23 lives at the Darul Quran Ittifaqiyah religious school in Datuk Keramat, Kuala Lumpur. Not that there weren't any cries before. In fact, there have been as many as the number of past fires. At last count, there have been 1,034 tahfiz school fires. Of those, 211 buildings were razed to the ground. Many still remember a similar tragedy in 1989, when 27 young lives were lost in Kedah. This latest fire tells the same story of neglect.

Finally, the High-Level Committee (HLC), led by no less a personality than Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, has answered the national cry for help. The HLC will table a cabinet proposal today to regulate all tahfiz schools through registration. Those that fail to do so will face closure. The HLC is also proposing amendments to the Education Act 1966 to allow the registration of private religious schools, including tahfiz centres. More importantly, the HLC's proposal for a permanent coordinating committee to monitor the schools will reduce the burden on the authorities as the committee will handle the registration process and other matters. The Islamic Development Department will also be roped into this committee.

Malaysians must learn to value life, limb and property because fire tragedies are not only a personal loss, but a national one as well.

While waiting for the cabinet and state government approvals, there are other important things that must be set right, such as, the call by the Urban Wellbeing, Housing and Local Government Ministry to set up firefighting squads at tahfiz schools, an idea endorsed by the HLC as well. They can act as first responders in an emergency while waiting for firemen to arrive. The National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (Niosh) and other parties, including the Fire and Rescue Department, have been tasked with conducting safety awareness and training at the schools.

While the nation's attention is focused on tahfiz schools, let us also not allow the owners of other buildings to slip past the authorities' attention. This paper has learned that there are many buildings that do not comply with safety codes. And, they are located in major cities like Kuala Lumpur, George Town, Kuching, Kota Kinabalu and Ipoh. They are not makeshift structures or *pondok*, but commercial buildings, such as shophouses and other business premises. The owners of those unsafe buildings are either being recalcitrant or trying to cut corners. These lackadaisical attitudes must not be allowed to become a culture.

There are enough laws to ensure that the tahfiz tragedy is not repeated elsewhere. One such law is the Fire Services Act 1988 (FSA), which enables the director-general of the Fire and Rescue Department to close down premises if he determines that the building is a fire hazard. Let us hope after this national outcry, we will not witness any more preventable fires. Malaysians must learn to value life, limb and property because they are not only a personal loss, but a national loss as well.