

Law to **cover** tahfiz schools

> Proposed changes to Education Act will give govt more power in their administration

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PUTRAJAYA: The Education Act 1996 may soon be amended to include private religious schools, to allow the federal government more involvement in coordinating the administration of such schools and providing financial assistance.

This was among several recommendations proposed

yesterday at the first meeting of a special task force set up to probe the recent fire tragedy at a tahfiz school in Kuala Lumpur.

Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Ahmad Zahid Hamidi said the move was subject to the approval of all state governments, as such schools are currently under their purview.

"We will have to engage the states first, because this is a

sensitive issue. In fact, we will be meeting state representatives this evening in a National Council for Islamic Religious Malaysia (MKI) meeting," he said after chairing the two-hour meeting yesterday.

"If agreed, we will present this recommendation, and the others, to the Cabinet tomorrow. And if given the nod, we will then table it in Parliament."

Ahmad Zahid said Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Seri Jamil Khir Baharom has been put in charge of delivering any messages from the federal government to the states.

Under the current Education Act, private schools do not include schools teaching only religious subjects, such as tahfiz establishments.

There are 941 private tahfiz schools nationwide, with 9,000 teachers and 150,000 students, but only 612 of the schools were registered with state authorities.

"A total of 329 are not even registered. They are worried the federal or state government would take over the schools.

"Also, most of the 941 schools do not meet the safety standard required by the authorities."

Since 1989, there have been 39 fires involving private religious schools, with 56 deaths.

Ahmad Zahid said among the other recommendations in yesterday's meeting that would be presented to MKI, was the drafting of criteria required for the establishment of tahfiz schools.

He said minimum health and safety standards would also be required for all religious schools, orphanages, old folk homes and child care centres.

The task force also recommended a fire and rescue volunteer unit be established to oversee the premises, and for a massive awareness campaign on fire safety to be carried out.

"In addition, the registration of these tahfiz schools will be jointly coordinated by the state and federal governments to avoid an overlap of authority."

The committee will also set up a permanent coordination committee to oversee all private religious schools in the country, which will be chaired by him.