



Devastating sight: Firefighters inspecting the razed wooden house in Tanjung Sepat.

Faith in retirement home turns into regret

KAJANG: A family checked on many retirement homes for the aged and came across Noble Care Home for the elderly in Sungai Long.

They had heard much about it and learnt that it had several branches. That boosted their confidence.

So Michael Yee, 40, decided that it was the right place for his grandmother, Teo Hoi Foo. He is now regretting the decision.

His grandmother was one of the five who died when fire raged through the building at about 10.45am yesterday.

"I didn't know until I saw the online report by *The Star*. After checking with my other family members, we came to the conclusion that it was her. Coming here confirmed it.

"She was my favourite grandmother," he said solemnly when met at the scene yesterday.

Teo, who was originally from Johor, had been living with her family in Singapore and Kuala Lumpur for some time now.

Yee said the family decided to admit her into the home after doing research on multiple places.

"I didn't know that it was operating without a business licence."

Yee said he planned to lodge a police report on the fire as well.

Other members of the deceased were seen at the scene.

An unidentified woman also broke down in front of the Fire and Rescue Department tent with firefighters rushing to calm her down.

More family members then came to console her as an officer told her about the incident. All of them refused to comment to the media.

The five bodies were sent to the Kajang Hospital forensic unit.

It is understood that the forensic unit would conduct DNA testing as the bodies were allegedly burnt beyond recognition and that family members had been contacted about the matter.

At about 3.45pm, four people (two men and two women) believed to be family members arrived and approached the forensic unit counter.

They spoke to authorities and after a few minutes left the building in tears.

They attempted to cover their faces and declined to stop when approached by reporters.

At press time, no other family members have been spotted at the hospital. One resident who survived the tragedy was also rushed to the hospital's emergency unit early yesterday morning and was subsequently warded.

KAJANG: The retirement home where five people died in an early morning blaze here is not registered with the Welfare Department, has no business licence from the local council, and is one of several branches in the Klang Valley.

The victims were residents Leow Chong Fatt, Teo Hoi Foo, Kwan Sak Seen and Lai Sew Yin, and caregiver Awis Muhammad, 25.

There were four survivors - three employees who suffered light injuries, and one resident who was rushed to Hospital Kajang and treated for smoke inhalation.

Kajang OCPD Asst Comm Ahmad Dzaffir Mohd Yusoff said the 4am blaze is believed to have started at the back of the hall on the ground floor of the building.

"We are still trying to identify the cause," he said.

He added that the elderly victims, two men and two women, were between 60 and 70 years old except Teo, who was 83. Sources said investigations so far have found no signs of foul play, although it is still too

'Home was unregistered and unlicensed'

early to say for sure.

District councillor Lai Wa Chong, who was at the scene, told reporters that no business licence was issued according to their records.

"We don't have any records. I have asked (Fire and Rescue) to check if they applied for a permit.

"Without a licence, they actually cannot operate," he said, adding that to get the licence, the operator of the home would also need approval from the Fire and Rescue Department.

At mid-day, a small argument ensued between the management of the home and officials from the Welfare Department.

It is believed that it was sparked when the management could not produce proof that the department had approved the home.

A witness who wanted to be known only as Shamsul said he heard the sirens as he was making his way to morning prayers.

"On the way back I saw the whole road filled with trucks. I asked the guard what was going on and he said there was a fire. I couldn't see it at first, but then it spread to the second floor of the home.

"The firefighters had to cut through the gate to get their hoses into position. I didn't even know there was an old folks' home here. This is a housing area," he said.

Women, Family and Community Development Minister Datuk Seri Rohani Abdul Karim said it was compulsory for operators of homes for children and the elderly to register with the Welfare Department or be taken to court.

Under the Private Aged Healthcare Facilities and Services Bill passed on Nov 29, all homes for the elderly must obtain an operating licence from the Health Ministry's director-general or face a RM30,000 fine. The new law ensures that such

homes meet fire safety requirements and provide proper health care to residents.

"I hope there will be no finger-pointing as this home was never registered. We need to take this as a lesson that all homes must be registered.

"This is to ensure the welfare and safety of the residents," said Rohani. Deputy Minister Datuk Azidah Mohd Dun said the new law had yet to be passed by Dewan Negara so "we will have to rely on existing laws in our investigations".

Under the existing Care Centre Act 1993, operators of unregistered old folks' homes can be fined up to RM10,000 or face two years in jail, or both, upon conviction.

Azidah noted that her ministry's probe would be separate from any police investigation of the incident.

"Our investigations will focus on the registration aspect," she added.

Fire and Rescue Services Department director-general Datuk Wira Mohd Nor Ibrahim said investigations are still ongoing.

"There are fire safety regulations which need to be followed. The homes must have fire extinguishers and proper escape routes for residents," he said, adding however that unregistered homes operated below the authorities' radar and some may ignore fire safety regulations.

The Star visited a branch of the Noble Care Nursing Home in Taman Shanghai off Old Klang Road, Kuala Lumpur. The home is in a double-storey semi-detached house, painted white with a black gate.

A caretaker, who appeared to be of Pakistani or Bangladeshi origin, confirmed that the home is part of the Noble Care group.

When asked who the owner is, the caretaker said it is one "Dr Ejaz".

The caretaker also said the owner was at another branch in Subang at the time.

There were no residents seen in the compound during the visit.

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