

'It just did not meet safety standards'

Flammable cladding panels fuelled the EPF building blaze, says fire deputy D-G

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PETALING JAYA: The cladding panels used on the exterior of the Employees Provident Fund (EPF) building in Jalan Gasing did not meet fire safety requirements, said Fire and Rescue Department deputy director-general Datuk Soiman Jahid.

Initial investigations revealed that the fire started on the first floor, where maintenance work was being carried out to the exterior of the building, he added.

"A spark ignited the cladding panels. Hot weather and strong wind were also factors in the spread of the fire to other parts of the building's exterior.

"The Uniform Building Bylaws require buildings to be fitted with less flammable cladding panels. Using more flammable ones is a clear infringement," he told report-

ers at the scene of the fire yesterday.

Cladding panels are used for the thermal insulation of buildings.

Soiman said that the material that was used in this case was polyethylene, which is more combustible.

"This incident is similar to the fire at Grenfell Tower in London last year where the use of flammable cladding panels was a key factor," he said.

A total of 70 firemen were deployed to Jalan Gasing once the call was received.

"The fire spread mostly on the exterior of the building. We managed to put out the fire completely within 30 minutes," he said.

Soiman announced that the department would conduct inspections on buildings nationwide, especially those with fire certificates.

"We will not renew fire certificates for buildings which use the more flammable cladding," he said.

Soiman called on all building

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owners and administrators not to use the more flammable cladding panels.

"It maybe cheaper but in the end, if a fire occurs, the price is too high to pay especially if it involves the loss of lives.

"I urge building owners who have used the more flammable cladding panels to change them immediately. If you are unsure, contact us so we can assess whether the right cladding has been used," he said.

Petaling Jaya deputy OCPD Supt Ku Mashariman Ku Mahmood said the police were on hand to assist fire fighters during the incident.

"We had to close some parts of the road leading to Jalan Gasing, so that the firefighters could put out the fire without any difficulties," he said.

EPF officer Azmi Herizat, who has worked at the social security institution for 18 years, said it was the first time such a fire occurred there.

"I was on the first floor when I heard cables exploding. I thought nothing of it until I saw smoke coming out from a room on the first floor. My colleagues and I quickly ran outside to safety," he said.

His co-worker Mohd Zawawi Ismail, who was manning the counters on the ground floor, said he initially thought the explosion-like sound was an accident on the Federal Highway.

"However, the smoke and burning smell made me realise it was a fire. I shouted at my colleagues and customers to leave immediately," he said, adding that "the constant fire drills at the institution were a blessing as everyone knew where to go".

EPF chief executive officer Datuk Shahril Ridza Ridzuan expressed gratitude to the Fire and Rescue

Department for putting out the blaze quickly, and apologised to those affected by the incident.

He said the statutory body would immediately investigate the cause of the fire and assess safety measures for all its buildings and branches nationwide.

Shahril expressed concern that a spark on the external cladding had started the fire, adding that they would fully cooperate with the authorities.

"Even though the fire only affected the external part of the building, I have instructed the Petaling Jaya branch to be closed until all necessary action has been taken to ensure the building is safe," he said in a statement last night.

Member and employer services are not affected by the incident, and all transactions can still be done normally at other branches throughout the country, or online via the *iAkaun* app.