

# Address issue of child neglect

LAST week, the police rescued a seven-year-old girl believed to have been left alone for several days without food and locked in a room of a house in Sungai Dua, Penang.

The Year One pupil was found in a weak condition, hungry and fatigued.

Earlier, police had received a report from a concerned teacher, who expressed worries over the physical condition of the girl who appeared weak and disorganised when she came to school.

Acting upon the report, police went to the house and found the girl. Initial investigation had found several bruises on the girl's upper arms and thighs and she was then taken to Seberang Jaya Hospital for further examination.

The girl's 34-year-old father, who works as a pump attendant at a petrol station, has been detained by the police to facilitate investigations. The issue concerning child neglect in this country is not new as there have been many similar incidents involving parental or guardian neglect.

Time after time, we have to read sad and horrible news of child neglect. The main concern now is how this can happen in a country

equipped with many laws protecting child welfare and interest.

Malaysia has enacted the Child Act 2001 (Act 611) to fulfil its obligations under the Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989 in order to protect the welfare of children below the age of 18 years old. Act 611, regarded as a comprehensive Act addressing child welfare and protecting their interest, was created and enforced in 2001.

It has repealed the Juvenile Courts Act 1947 (Act 90), the Women and Girls Protection Act 1973 (Act 106) and the Child Protection Act 1991 (Act 468). Act 611 also provides a particular section dealing specifically with the ill-treatment, neglect, abandonment or exposure of children.

According to Section 31, any person who, being a person having the care of a child (a) abuses, neglects, abandons or exposes the child in a manner likely to cause him physical or emotional injury or causes or permits him to be so abused, neglected, abandoned or exposed or (b) sexually abuses the child or causes or permits him to be so abused, commits an offence and shall on conviction be liable to a fine not exceeding RM20,000

or to imprisonment for a term not exceeding 10 years or to both.

Though the punishment imposed upon conviction seems harsh to us, many regard the section as incomplete as it didn't specify in detail the meaning of the words ill-treatment, neglect, abandonment or exposure of children.

As such many parents or guardians take the matter easy and some are not even aware their action amounts to child neglect.

The suggestion put forward by Women, Family and Community Development Minister Datuk Seri Rohani Abdul Karim to have a new Act emphasising specifically on the issue of parental neglect of children in replacing the Child Act 2001 should be welcome and accepted positively by all parties.

Besides strengthening the law, the relevant ministry as well as the NGOs must work together to increase the level of awareness and educate all parents about their basic responsibility and sacred duties to protect their own children from any harm or danger.

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