

Tighten enforcement before lives are lost

THERE are valuable lessons to be learnt from the recent fire at the Employees Provident Fund (EPF) building in Petaling Jaya.

According to the Fire and Rescue Department, the fire started on the external cladding of the building, caused by a spark that ignited a panel during maintenance work.

The Malaysian Institute of Architects stated that the polyfoam material used for the building's façade, though different from that used for London's Grenfell Tower which caught fire last year, is a flammable polymer-based material and is not allowed to be used for high-rise buildings.

The EPF building had undergone renovation with the installation of new cladding to change its appearance. The polyfoam and composite panel materials were chosen for their lightweight character and weather-resistant properties but they come with high risk of fire.

Under the Uniform Building By-Laws 1984, enacted under the Street, Drainage and Building Act 1974, any building skin system that contains combustible materials is prohibited for use in any building higher than five storeys. This is to prevent flames from spreading in the event of fire. The EPF office is six-storeys high.

The blaze raises many unanswered questions. If the materials used are flammable and breach building by-laws, how did it escape the attention of the relevant authorities? Did the EPF know that such materials were used for the renovations?

The relevant ministries need to ensure that such mishaps do not occur again. It can be totally preventable with stricter enforcement.

The fire this time round did not claim any lives but should we wait for a tragedy to happen before we act?

In the meantime, the authorities should conduct checks on recently renovated buildings. They should ensure that all by-laws were adhered to, and to severely penalise those who breached the laws and in the process endanger lives. **FocusM**