

'Owners responsible for fire safety'

Dept: Stern action can be taken if building renovation infringes on requirements

By **FARIK ZOLKEPLI**
and **MARTIN CARVALHO**
newsdesk@thestar.com.my

KUALA LUMPUR: Stern action can be taken against building owners for any renovation which did not meet fire safety regulations.

Fire and Rescue Department director-general Datuk Wan Mohd Nor Ibrahim said under the Fire Services Act 1988, owners are culpable for any renovation that infringes on fire safety requirements including the installation of easily flammable cladding panels.

"The Uniform Building Bylaws is clear in providing guidelines that meet fire safety regulations, thus building owners must abide by it and ensure the contractors followed the approved specifications," he said.

He said building owners could face up to a RM5,000 fine and not more than three years' imprisonment if found guilty of fire safety infringement.

"If a building did not meet the necessary requirements such as installing easily flammable cladding, then we will instruct them to change it. If they failed to adhere, we will take sterner legal action against the building owner," he said.

Wan Mohd Nor said the department would conduct inspections nationwide on buildings suspected of not abiding by fire safety regulations, including the use of easily flammable cladding.

Malaysian Institute of Architects

president Ar. Ezumi Harzani said the laws are clear that combustible materials are not allowed for buildings higher than 18m (or five storeys) to prevent flames from spreading through the external façade.

"Therefore, building façade material using poly-foam or poly-ethylene base is not permitted to be used for high-rise buildings," he said.

He said that poly-foam used in the EPF building is not a common building façade material but some buildings use them for decorative elements.

Former director-general of the Fire and Rescue Department Datuk Dr Soh Chai Hock said the management of high-rise buildings using cladding made of easily flammable materials can find themselves slapped with a fine or end up spending time behind bars.

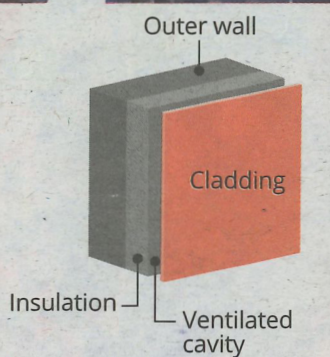
"The use of such cladding would defeat the purpose of buildings constructed with fire barriers to prevent flames from spreading between floors," he said, blaming the 'tidak apa attitude' (indifference) as a factor why some buildings end up using flammable cladding.

Dr Soh, however, conceded that it was a daunting task for the fire department to carry out a thorough audit of thousands of high-rise buildings nationwide owing to the lack of manpower for the purpose.

"It would be easier for buildings with fire certificates as they require annual inspection and approval," he said.

What is cladding?

Cladding is a type of "skin" or extra layer on the outside of a building. It can be attached to a building's framework or an intermediate layer of battens or spacers.



Cladding uses

- It is mainly used to stop wind and rain from entering the building.
- Cladding can also provide sound and thermal insulation as well as fire resistance.
- It is often used to make a building's exterior look more attractive.

What is cladding made from?

- Wood, metal, brick, vinyl, composite materials that can include aluminium, wood, blends of cement and recycled polystyrene, wheat/rice straw fibres.

Is cladding fire resistant?

- Excellent fire resistance cladding: brick.
- High fire resistance cladding: planks or weatherboards made from fibre cement or steel.
- Good fire resistance cladding: aluminium, reconstituted timber products.
- Poor fire resistance cladding: timber weatherboards, plywood sheets.

What are the issues with aluminium composite cladding panels?

- There is potential for fire to spread quickly upwards in a building if inappropriate products are used.
- The panels consist of two aluminium faces and a core material such as polyethylene, a mineral-based material, or a combination of both.
- Panels are between 3mm and 5mm thick.
- They may look similar on the outside, but their core materials may differ and affect their fire resistance.
- Panels with a higher proportion mineral core are considered to withstand fire better, but can still be considered combustible.

Sources: www.yourhome.gov.au; Australian Building Codes Board; NSW Government

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