

KERATAN AKHBAR-AKHBAR TEMPATAN
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KERATAN AKHBAR
SUNDAY STAR (INTERVIEW WITH) : MUKA SURAT 18
TARIKH : 8 MEI 2016 (AHAD)

*Datuk Wira Wan
Mohd Nor Ibrahim*

All ablaze over their mission



They carry one of the heaviest burdens on their smartly uniformed shoulders because lives and property are on the line. Over the years, the Fire and Rescue Department has morphed into a sophisticated, well-oiled machine ready to spring into action – whether on land, sea or air.

By NELSON BENJAMIN
nelson@thestar.com.my

EACH day, the Fire and Rescue Department responds to about 200 fires and rescue calls nationwide.

Their roles have evolved from just putting out fires in buildings to more complex rescues on land, sea and air.

In an interview with *The Star* in conjunction with Hari Bomba which will be celebrated with much pomp in Johor on Tuesday, the department's director-general Datuk Wira Wan Mohd Nor Ibrahim talks about their role and challenges over the years.

He also shares his vision on the department's core business of saving lives, conducting rescue operations, fighting fires and maintaining public fire safety.

Each year, the dry spell caused by the El Niño phenomenon sees bush and forest fires ignite nationwide. How is the department coping? How can the public help?

El Niño is not an annual phenomenon. However, it is happening with higher frequency in recent years. There was a major dry spell in 2014, we did not have it last year, and it is back again this year. El Niño peaked in April and according to the **Meteorological Department**, it is weakening and expected to end by mid-June.

Each time there is a dry spell, it is the busiest time for the fire department. On average, we receive about 200 calls for fires and rescue operations daily but during the dry spell, the calls more than double. But from what we

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Datuk Wira Wan Mohd Nor Ibrahim

have seen so far, this year is not as bad as the El Niño effect was not widespread throughout the country. Based on our operations, most of the fires this time are in Sabah, northern Sarawak and the northern part of the peninsula. Also, this time the fires did not occur in peat soil areas of Selangor, Johor and Pahang, which would have been challenging for us.

So far, we can cope. We hope the public will stop all open burning activities during the dry spell. Our investigations show that most fires are due to human activity – burning farms or estates to clear land for cultivation, and fires lit at dump sites. In the past, we had cases in Selangor and Pahang where the orang asli – who intended to torch 0.4ha of land to plant bananas – ended up destroying 40ha of land due to the dry season. These days we are working with the Orang Asli Development Department to educate them not to carry out open burning during the dry spell.

What are the new challenges faced when tackling natural disasters, forest fires and floods?

The best way to manage a disaster is to plan way ahead. We have to always be one step ahead of any situation. For example, floods are an annual occurrence. So, we start planning at least three months ahead of the monsoon season and discuss manpower and asset deployment strategies with other agencies.

A multi-agency approach and coordination is needed to tackle natural disasters. We have come a long way since the 1991 fire at The Bright Sparklers Fireworks factory in Sungai Buloh. That incident underscored the need for a special team to handle hazardous chemicals. Before that, we did not have any such team and we responded to the fireworks factory fire as if it were any other structural fire.

After that incident, we formed Hazardous Materials (Hazmat) teams in all states. Hazmat teams now handle over 1,000 cases involving chemicals and gases each year. Then, the Highland Towers collapse in 1993 taught us the importance of disaster management, so the National Disaster Management mechanism was formed alongside the Special Malaysia Disaster Assistance and Rescue Team (Smart).

Previously, many agencies were involved with very little coordination but we now have a standard operating procedure (SOP) to handle disasters. Another incident was the 1997 haze, where we dispatched 1,200 firemen to fight forest fires in Indonesia. That made us realise the importance of forest fire fighting. To douse flames in a jungle is different from

putting out a building fire. You need smaller pumps and lighter equipment. You have to build trenches and flood them. If it involves peat soil, you have to bore holes below the surface to get the water to the fires. These fires take a long time to douse and can stretch on for weeks or months and requires a lot of manpower.

With Malaysia's rapid development, many industries have mushroomed around the country. How is the department preparing for chemical fires or spills?

Yes, there are thousands of industries now. That is why it is important for us to be involved in the planning stage – before construction – of a factory or building. We need to make sure these buildings conform to safety standards and have the necessary fire protection system in place in case of an emergency.

We also want to be in the know of the chemicals used and their risks and hazards. That is why we spend a lot of money to equip and train our Hazmat teams around the country. We must always be one step ahead as new chemicals are developed all the time and we need to be ready. We also focus on areas with a high concentration of industries and petrochemical plants such as the Klang Valley, Johor, Penang, Sabah, Sarawak, Negri Sembilan and Terengganu.

Each year, billions of ringgit in property and goods is lost to fires. What are the new trends noticed? How can these fires be prevented?

From our statistics, a huge chunk of losses

SAMBUNGAN...

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Fire statistics for Malaysia

	2013	2014	2015	2016 until March
House fires	3,235	3,066	1,816	700
Car fires	3,313	3,558	2,281	1,030
Factory /shoplot fires	332	298	178	58
Forest /bush /farm /plantation fires	13,555	30,728	15,243	12,646
Fire calls nationwide	33,640	54,540	29,637	19,588
Deaths in fires	72	139	98	25
Fake calls to the department	469	1,004	441	189
Accidents and other rescue calls	33,068	42,712	20,583	9,231

Total property saved by the Fire and Rescue Department and losses suffered in fires

	2013 (RMbil)	2014 (RMbil)	2015 (RMbil)	2016 until March (RM)
Property Losses Due to Fire	1.99	2.79	3.35	347mil
Property Saved	12.67	24.5	12.5	4.19bil

Fire and Rescue Department facts

Total Fire Stations	280
Total Firemen Nationwide	14,000
Total Auxiliary Firemen	1,000
Total Volunteer Firemen	13,000
Total School Fire Cadets	100,000
Total Budget for the Fire Department Annually	RM800mil



Source: Fire and Rescue Department Malaysia

come from factory fires. One factory fire can sometimes incur losses of RM10mil. So our focus is to try to reduce the number of factory fires. One of our findings show that all factories are well-equipped with fire-fighting and protection systems but after awhile, due to the lack of maintenance, the systems fail or do not function well during a fire. We need to make sure the systems are always maintained and in peak condition.

I have told my men to step up visits and focus on maintenance records in factories. This is a huge and daunting task as there are many factories nationwide. We are also strengthening the internal capability of factories, including forming and training their emergency response teams to respond to a fire before we can get to the site.

Are factories deliberately torched to claim insurance compensation? How does the department deal with those who flout fire safety regulations?

I do not discount that possibility... there could be cases, but it is not rampant. We have good fire investigation teams and all structural fires are investigated in detail to determine the cause. If it is arson, the police will investigate as it involves insurance claims.

Out of 1,000 cases investigated, we are unable to reach a conclusion in only two or less cases - 0.2%. So far, most factory fires are accidental. On prosecution, I feel it is not that factory owners do not want to comply with safety standards. When we tell them what needs rectifying, they comply. The owners may not be proactive enough. They want us to tell them what needs doing. Even down to the most common item - change blue fire extinguishers to red ones. But you can still find blue extinguishers at some premises.

Nationwide, at least 90% of houses and cars do not have fire extinguishers. Are the

numbers of fires increasing each year?

For now, it is not compulsory for houses and cars to have a fire extinguisher but we advise the public to have one in their homes and vehicles. Fires in houses and cars happen daily.

One thing that stands out is that the number of fires involving cars is on the rise. We do not know the actual reason for this increase - is it due to the rising number of vehicles, or miswiring, or too much accessories or a faulty engine? We are still studying this. Many fire-related deaths happen in houses and usually, the victims are children, senior citizens and disabled people. And usually, it is the smoke that kills.

We have many fire volunteer squads and cadets nationwide. How is their performance and how is the department managing them?

Presently, we have about 13,000 volunteers nationwide. We also have another 100,000 school cadets annually and about 1,000 auxiliary firemen around the country. We provide training and equipment to these groups. For example, volunteer fire squads are provided with basic fire-fighting equipment such as pumps, personal protective gear as well as hoses. For cadets, we train not just them, but also their teachers to become trainers. Without help from these squads, we would not be able to cope as we only have 14,000 firemen manning 280 fire stations nationwide. The volunteers and auxiliary firemen are mostly based in small, rural towns where few cases happen. We appreciate the services of these teams.

Since taking over as director-general six years ago, which of your plans have been implemented? Are you happy with the results so far?

I always want us to push ourselves to be

better and I am constantly working towards improving the department's response time. The quality of our services is measured based on how fast we can arrive on the scene. We benchmark ourselves with the fire services in the United Kingdom and Japan; their national average response time is about 10 minutes while ours hovers at about 15 minutes.

We are striving to improve on this by having more fire stations in major cities, new townships and industrial areas. We are also strengthening our volunteer groups to provide assistance in rural areas. I am sure the public will be happy if we are able to arrive at a scene in under 10 minutes.

In the last five years, we have built and repaired 134 homes belonging to fire victims and the poor under the National Blue Ocean Strategy (NBOS). More recently, we have started a service known as Pusat Seheniti Pasca Insiden (Post-Fire Incident Services) known as PSPI, to help fire victims. After a fire, my station chiefs provide additional services to the victims, including liaising with other government agencies to provide assistance. Many victims of a fire or accident are traumatised and do not know what to do after an incident and with PSPI, we provide the necessary assistance.

Since last year, we have handled 255 PSPI cases nationwide. I also want to improve on our engagement with the public through our Bomba community programme where we provide basic fire-fighting and rescue techniques.

Can you elaborate on the massive modernisation of equipment for land, sea and air operations in the last 20 years?

The department is constantly evolving to keep up with the changing times. We understand that there are a lot of expectations and demands from the public. That is why we are constantly modernising - from various kinds

of equipment to sending our personnel for skills training. We now have helicopters to evacuate people trapped on mountain peaks and in jungles, we help evacuate orang asli victims to hospitals and carry out water-bombing during forest fires. We also have special metal cutters to help extricate victims of road accidents and even devices to cut off outgrown rings from fingers.

Each year, the department gets thousands of applications from wannabe firemen. Many are overqualified. Why is this job so sought-after when it is said to be stressful?

Every year, 500 to 1,000 vacancies open up due to retiring staff and the setting up of new fire stations. But annually, we get about 30,000 applications. Many applicants are degree holders... so yes, we have a huge pool to shortlist from. I think it is the nature of our business that attracts people. And yes, based on studies done in the United States, a fireman has one of the most stressful careers. But to me, being a fireman is more about the passion and desire to help others.

This year, Hari Bomba will be held in Johor and for the first time, Johor Ruler Sultan Ibrahim ibni Almarhum Sultan Iskandar will be participating in the May 10 event. What are the highlights?

We have planned an array of activities to mark Hari Bomba. The highlights include a grand parade comprising of over 1,000 firemen, ERTs, school cadets, personnel from the Pasir Gudang Emergency Mutual Aid (Pagema), and airport and army fire services. We will also have a parade of 60 fire engines and vehicles. And our helicopters will carry out a flypast. The Johor Ruler has also agreed to exhibit his private collection of fire engines which date back to the 1950s and 1960s.