

AFTER EPF FIRE, SURVEYORS URGE NATIONAL AUDIT OF ALL BUILDING CLADDINGS

The Malay Mail, 14 February 2018

KUALA LUMPUR, Feb 14 — The Fire and Rescue Department has to inspect buildings throughout Malaysia to see if illegal claddings have been used, a professional body for building surveyors said following the fire at Employees Provident Fund (EPF) building yesterday.

Royal Institution of Surveyors Malaysia (RISM), vice-president, Sr Mohd Amin Mohd Din agreed that the inspections should be carried out as a lesson from the EPF fire at the Jalan Gasing branch, which was worsened by a flammable cladding.



The EPF building at Jalan Gasing caught fire around 11.30am in Petaling Jaya February 13, 2018.

“Ya, of course, why not. I agree, learning from the EPF case. No money can compensate lives,” he told *Malay Mail* when contacted.

Mohd Amin noted the trend in the past five to 10 years where many buildings were fitted with external claddings to make them look nice, but said it was uncertain if such claddings had been approved by the Fire and Rescue Department.

“If not, all these buildings must be inspected by now. Claddings should be changed or improved, use some fire retardant material or fire retardant spray,” he said, adding that the Fire and Rescue Department's approval or advice should be sought prior to installation.

This will be necessary to prevent a repeat of incidents such as the fatal Grenfell tower blaze last year - that was also worsened by combustible claddings - and the EPF Petaling Jaya office fire which “luckily” had no fatalities, he said.

“Buildings that are 10 years old or more must be inspected. We don't want an incident like the EPF fire to reoccur. Now with higher temperature, 2 to 4 degrees Celsius higher than before, probably the material is not as good as it performed before.”

Selection and installation process

Mohd Amin said the designer or architect in a property project should never have specified the use of combustible material for building claddings, stressing that such materials should not have been installed at all.

“For me, shouldn't specify at all. If not, then must refer to the respective authorities,” he said.

Factors that may be considered by building owners in claddings selection could be the desire to have a maintenance-free facade that would otherwise be very costly if re-paintings are required, as well as the weight of claddings — with lighter material prone to catching fire while heavier material could be dangerous if it falls, he said.

“All the materials — whether imported or local — must comply with fire safety requirements by the Bomba,” he said when stressing the importance of safe cladding materials.

He said that local materials must comply with Malaysian standards set by the local certification body SIRIM, while the Construction Industry Development Board (CIDB) must check if imported materials comply with the required standards.

“If the installer can produce a certificate that the material complies with local standards or approved standard, fine, but if not, CIDB has the right to retest by sending it to SIRIM or accredited testing body,” he said.

He said that cladding materials should be approved by the Fire and Rescue Department first before installation, adding: “Every renovation must be approved by Bomba especially when they are proposing to use any combustible material.”

Beyond selecting safe cladding materials, Mohd Amin said the fixing itself of claddings must be supervised by a competent person and obtain approval from the Fire and Rescue Department.

“Fixing should be performed by installers who are certified and trained by accredited National Occupational Skills Standard (NOSS) scheme,” said Mohd Amin, who is also a member of the technical standards committee in the Department of Skills Development under Human Resource Ministry that oversees NOSS programmes.

He said supervisors and certified trained installers who oversee works with risk of fire occurring must be prepared with devices such as fire extinguishers to quickly stamp out any fire that break out.

“If they didn't do it, I feel it's partly their fault, they are trained...so they must prepare as in standard operating procedures (SOP).

“If it's a small fire, they can extinguish it with a fire extinguisher. Fire normally starts small,” he said.

Installers should also be mindful of unfavorable weather conditions such as heavy rainfall, strong gusts of wind and exceptionally high temperature, with the latter possibly causing a cladding not installed well to continuously expand and contract and becoming loose.

“Fix it properly so it won't be loose in case of high gusts of wind and abnormal weather, then there may pose or cause a danger of it falling from the building. If not fixed properly, it can hit the public or pedestrians,” he said.

Installers should either stop work or not start work until normal conditions resume, he said.

Ensuring safety doesn't end there

After a building is completed and claddings are fitted, it would have to go through another round of inspections and approval, he said.

The local authorities were previously tasked with checking a building for approval for the issuance of a Certificate of Fitness (CF), but the Certificate of Completion and Compliance scheme (CCC) which replaced the CF scheme now requires the project consultant or the principal submitting person (PSP) to confirm with the installers that they have conformed to the required standards and statutory requirements, he said.

“Building inspectors will normally come in under the request of either the owner, or local authority (PBT) or financier, because they pay, they want to make sure their building is according to specifications. Building surveyors can also advise if not done according to specifications and approved plans,” he said.

Installers must return within five years to inspect and carry out maintenance works to ensure that the claddings are in good condition, he said.

While noting that the Kuala Lumpur City Hall requires buildings to be inspected once every 10 years, Mohd Amin suggested that such checks be held at least every two years or annually, and also after abnormal weather.

He said inspections for fire safety in buildings should be for the Fire and Rescue Department, while building surveyors could assist in checks for overall safety and in regular scheduled inspections.

Mohd Amin said each institution's top management, safety officer, building caretaker or security guard should also walk around and look out for any possible fire hazards.

“Some people leave cigarette butts which are not properly put out. That is why it is not allowed to smoke freely in any premises. Smoking is only allowed at a specified location only,” he said.