

NATIONAL

POLITICS

Provincial parliament faces axe

AEKARACH SATTABURUTH

A parliamentary affairs committee will today decide the fate of a plan to set up provincial parliament offices across the country amid reports the scheme is likely to be scrapped.

Pirarak Porchit, vice-president of the National Legislative Assembly, said an evaluation report of the pilot scheme will go before the meeting, after a sub-committee has reviewed and forwarded it to the committee for a final say. Mr Pirarak is also vice-chairman of the parliamentary affairs committee. Critics of the scheme doubt the project to establish provincial parliament offices, which was initiated in 2012 by former parliament president Somsak Kiatsuranont, will continue.

A panel in charge of evaluating the work of six pilot provincial parliament offices is understood to have given the pilot scheme the thumbs-down due to their poor performance and recommended the scheme be axed. The evaluation committee found the offices duplicate the work of other agencies, including the Damrongtham Centre, which receives complaints about state officials accused of power abuse, and the King Prachadipok Institute. The pilot provincial parliament offices were established in Chiang Rai, Khon Kaen, Ubon Ratchathani, Surat Thani, Ayutthaya and Chon Buri.

They are designed to support the work of the legislative branch in law-making and scrutinising the government's performance. They are also supposed to promote democracy, publicise the work of parliament, accept complaints and give legal advice to the public.

A source said yesterday the sub-committee on parliament affairs found the six offices spent 50.37 million baht altogether during July 2013-August 2014 to fund their operations. Of the total, 6.2 million baht was spent on seminars and field trips, 7 million baht on repairing and refurbishing buildings and about 16.6 million baht on salaries for office staff. The Secretariat of the House is reportedly considering launching a probe into alleged irregularities.



Lent ends brightly

A performer in a colourful costume attends the traditional northern Tan Kua Salak alms-giving ceremony at Wat Komut Phita Rangsi on Phuthamonthon Sai I Road. People, mostly from northern provinces, offer food to monks to celebrate the end of Buddhist Lent. **PHOTO BY PORN PORN SATTABURUTH**

KOH TAO

Lawyer's Council mulls defending murder suspects

POST REPORTERS

The Lawyers Council of Thailand is expected to decide today whether it will assign lawyers to assist in the case of the two Myanmar men accused of murder on Koh Tao.

The Myanmar embassy has also appointed a lawyer to interview the pair, though it is not known if he will help if the matter goes to trial. Meanwhile, a human rights network is offering the services of prominent lawyer Nakhon Chomphuchat to lead the defence of the two suspects, if they choose to appoint him.

Mr Nakhon said the Cross-Cultural Foundation (CrCF) has asked him if he would like to represent suspects Zaw Htun and Zaw Lin, who face lengthy prison terms if convicted for their alleged murder of

British tourists Hannah Witheridge and David Miller.

Several human rights agencies, including CrCF and the Human Rights and Development Foundation, have expressed concern about the treatment of Win and Zaw. If appointed, Mr Nakhon said he would look into his clients' condition, as well as claims the police investigation was improperly carried out. The rights group Amnesty International has suggested the pair were tortured into confessing.

The suspects have been questioned several times without lawyers, he said, adding police were still saying the suspects refused to have a lawyer. Mr Nakhon said he and his team would work with the lawyer's council if they decide to get involved.

Police insist the investigation was fair, and denied reports the suspects were tortured into confessing.

Press on with talks, says KL

Malaysia envoy backs bringing in civil sector

CHANANTHORN KAMJAN

Malaysia stands firm on maintaining close ties with Thailand, particularly on forging pathways to democracy and building peace in the deep South, says the Malaysian ambassador to Thailand.

Dato Nazirah Hussain, who has represented her country in Bangkok since 2011, told the Bangkok Post in a special interview that Malaysia has never abandoned the ASEAN way in maintaining "constructive engagement" with Thailand amid its political change.

"We live in the same region; it is not worthwhile judging," she said. "We give support when you need it and you know that you have a friend in us," she added.

Ms Nazirah also expressed appreciation over the way Thais handle political

accidents or natural disasters.

"Thai people are resilient as they can handle unexpected incidents. We saw that in the 2011 floods, when Thailand bounced back. Since the coup, we see something similar, as economic growth has returned," she said. Malaysia would not interfere in Thailand's internal affairs.

"We believe in our neighbours prospering. If something happens, if something happens, it will affect the neighbourhood," the Malaysian ambassador said.

On its confidence in the government led by Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha, Ms Nazirah said Malaysia recognised Thai political developments as internal matters. Public confidence is reflected in royal endorsement of the government and its recognition by Thais.

"We will continue to work with the government since we have a lot of areas to work together. We also can see the situation in Thailand is stable, people seem

to be very happy. So we look forward to seeing the election next year," she said.

She added that Thailand is generally democratic, even though the country has taken several routes to reach a democratic destination.

For the southern unrest, Ms Nazirah reiterated the Malaysian government is ready to facilitate the negotiations between the Thai government and the separatist groups.

She insisted the talks must continue and the Malaysian role is facilitator, not mediator.

"It is good to bring people to the table, so the talks must continue. As we talked to the scholars and academics in the past, they said we must include

people in the talks, such as civil society. They should be part of it since they are also stakeholders," she said.

Ms Nazirah said civil society can take part in the negotiations as representatives of people who live in the area, especially those who have suffered from the



Nazirah: Thai politics 'not worth judging'

insurgency, which has been underway for many years. She said the two-side negotiations are a good start, but the people should get involved when the talks develop to a further stage.

"It is important for Thailand to bring in people who are stakeholders in peace and stability, but ultimately it is up to the Thai side to decide. We are looking forward to the talks continuing because talking is better," she said.

Despite the continuing unrest, the Malaysian envoy is optimistic the peace talks will proceed until the situation returns to normal. How long it takes is not an obstacle from her perspective.

Beside the talks, Ms Nazirah also emphasised economic stability and education in the deep South, saying economic strength could lead to development while education could also help in terms of mindset.

"Education can help you find the way out. We must teach them to understand the value of peace and stability. We must live together in a spirit of harmony and trust," she said.

Boxing superstar vanishes mid-fight

A much-awaited bout between Muay Thai superstar Sombhat "Buakaw" Banchamek and Germany's Enrico Kehl took a strange twist on Saturday night when the three-round fight ended in a draw and went down to a decisive round — but the Thai boxer was nowhere to be seen.

Buakaw, 31, was disqualified and his 22-year-old German opponent was crowned the new champion in the 70-kilogramme division, amid boos and jeers from the crowd in Pattaya.

Early yesterday, a message posted on his Banchamek Gym's Facebook page said: "I apologise for making my supporters puzzled.

"You'll soon understand me." The message triggered a flood of comments, mostly understanding and support for the Thai boxer.

Several believe the incident had something to do with alleged gambling.

Hotline offers helping hand to police officers on the edge

It may come as a surprise to many to learn that police officers have a high suicide rate. But the life of a law enforcement officer can be stressful, so much so that suicide rates among cops are three times higher than those of the general population. This finding, from a recent study by the Police General Hospital, has prompted new police chief Pol Gen Somyot Pumpaunung to launch the 1599 hotline support service to help ease the stress suffered by many police.

An increasing number of Thailand's finest are reportedly taking their own lives. In recent years, an average of 29 officers committed suicide each year.

But from July last year to July this year, as many as 44 police committed suicide. And in August another four killed themselves.

Most of these suicides were among low-ranking and non-commissioned policemen. In most cases, they took their lives using their service pistol.

The hotline, which opened last week, is intended to be a channel to help officers deal with work-related problems, as well as personal and family issues that are weighing them down.

Pol Gen Somyot described the hotline service as a way to heal the mental state of some police who become overwhelmed by problems that can lead to a tragic end.

During its pilot phase, the hotline will be available only on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 1-4pm.

Psychologists will take calls from those wanting consultations or to let off steam about their problems, whether they are work-related or not.

"I've talked to some police who came under pressure after they were transferred to a new position with duties they didn't know and felt they were not capable of doing," said Pol Gen Somyot.

Any officer facing such problems, he said, should feel free to inform him and he would discuss with his superiors the possibility of transferring the unhappy officer somewhere else.

Pol Maj Nipaporn Kham-ut, a psychologist with the Police General Hospital's psychiatry and narcotics sections, who directs the 1599 hotline, said most of the cops committing suicide were non-commissioned officers in their forties who were struggling with several burdens, both at work and at home.

The Police General Hospital study also found that those who committed suicide were driven by many factors, not just one. "I've talked to some police who came under pressure after they were transferred to a new position with duties they didn't know and felt they were not capable of doing," said Pol Gen Somyot.



Counselling service aims to tackle alarmingly high rate of cop suicides, writes Wassayos Ngamkham



A psychologist speaks to a caller on the Royal Thai Police Office's Hotline number 1599 that provides a psychological consultancy service. The hotline is run by the office's centre that handles complaints submitted by the public. **PAWAT LAOPAISANTAKSIN**

One of the reasons police have a high rate of suicide, Pol Maj Nipaporn said, is because the profession comes with many responsibilities.

Police have to deal with the many types of people in society.

Many officers work as if they were on call around the clock. Public holidays are normally working days for most law enforcement officers, which means they rarely have enough time to spend with their families, she said.

"As work demands an unusual amount of their time, police are prone to encountering family issues as a result of not having enough time at home," she said.

"Money is another problem, because police don't earn very much."

To make matters worse, most officers would not dare to visit psychologists or psychiatrists at the Police General Hospital to seek help. It is just too much of a taboo for them.

Help is now just a phone call away. On its first two days of service, 14 police officers called for help, according to Pol Maj Nipaporn. As a rule, each caller is given a maximum of 45 minutes.

When officers call the 1599 hotline, the standard practice is to listen to what they have to say and encourage them to speak their mind.

Instead of attempting to tell the callers what they should do, she said, the psychologist on duty should encourage the callers to think of ways out of the problems on their own, with only minimal guidance, as needed.

But, unlike other telephone-based psychological consulting services, the 1599 hotline caller is free to decide whether to tell the psychologist on the end of the line his or her identity.

If signs of serious forms of mental disorder are detected during the counselling session, the psychologist will refer the caller to psychiatrists for further treatment.

Contact Crime Track: crimetrack@bangkokpost.co.th

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