

Freedom of Information campaign launch tomorrow (Thursday) night

*By Jacqueline Ann Surin
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PETALING JAYA: A freedom of information (FOI) campaign will be launched tomorrow night (Sept 28, 2006) by the FOI Coalition to commemorate International Right to Know Day, and to lobby for the drafting and ratification of a FOI Act in Malaysia.

The coalition of 26 organisations, including women's, environmental and human rights groups, wants Malaysia to join 50 other countries that have enacted FOI laws since the 1990s.

"Various civil society organisations have been calling for a freedom of information law since the 1970s but two years ago (2004), various organisations came up with 10 principles that need to be met for a meaningful Malaysian access to information law," said FOI Coalition secretariat spokesman and Center for Independent Journalism executive director Sonia Randhawa.

She said the FOI campaign will be launched at a public seminar on "The Environmental Cost of Concealing Information" at the Bar Council Auditorium in Kuala Lumpur at 8.30pm.

Apart from Randhawa, the speakers are Universiti Malaya associate professor of law Dr Azmi Sharom, and Ong Ju Lin, who produced "Alice Lives Here", a documentary about the Broga community's efforts to stop the construction of Asia's largest incinerator.

Randhawa said she was optimistic about the situation in Malaysia because of the administration's commitment to fighting corruption and increasing transparency and openness.

"There has also been interest from a number of places, including local authorities, in institutionalising access to information," she said.

She said the most exciting development is that in a televised online forum (on www.tvpas.com), PAS vice-president Datuk Husam Musa made a public commitment to passing an access to information law in Kelantan.

"This is a major step forward, and they should be commended by all parties interested in transparency and openness," she said.

Azmi, an environmental law expert, said FOI is needed if citizens are to participate meaningfully in environmental decision-making.

"You can't give proper critiques of a project if you do not have enough information.

"There are only two statutes which provide for citizen participation; the Town and Country Planning Act and the Environmental Quality Act. Neither provide any FOI provisions," he said.

Instead of a FOI law, Malaysia has an Official Secrets Act that stipulates that once something is declared an "official secret", it cannot "be questioned in any court on any ground whatsoever".

In the past, Environmental Impact Assessment reports for mega projects like the Bakun Dam, and the Air Quality Index have been declared official secrets.

Randhawa said Malaysians also don't know what we're drinking, unlike in Canada where water bills contain a breakdown of water quality before and after treatment, and compares these to national standards.

She said lack of access to information encourages corruption or the perception of corruption.

Citing the recent issue of contracts that have been awarded to Scomi Bhd, she said the company's declaration that they received all contracts through open tender doesn't tell people enough and encourages public scepticism.

International Right to Know Day which falls yearly on Sept 28 was launched four years ago (2002) by the Freedom of Information Advocates Network that comprises 90 members worldwide.

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