

**KUALA LUMPUR:** Bullying cases are still being reported regularly in schools despite the repeated calls to put an end to this unhealthy and dangerous culture.

Last month, the police confirmed it is investigating an alleged bullying case involving a student at an elite boarding school in Kuala Kangsar, Perak, following a post that went viral on social media.

Just recently, a Form Two student was reported to have run away from the dormitory of his school in Cheras here as he could not bear being bullied.

Perhaps, one of the worst cases of bullying the nation has ever seen involved National Defence University of Malaysia (UPNM) cadet Zulfarhan Osman Sulikarnain who died on June 1, 2017, allegedly due to bullying.

According to the Ministry of Education (MOE), up to October this year 4,994 bullying cases were reported, compared to 3,887 cases in 2022 and 326 in 2021.

Lately, there have been calls from various quarters advocating an anti-bullying law to address the abominable practice and mete out punishment proportionate to the seriousness of the offences committed by bullies.

Experts interviewed by Bernama agreed it is high time Malaysia enacted a specific law, similar to the anti-bullying legislation implemented in the United States and the Philippines, to deal with bullying incidents.

In September, MOE launched the Guidelines for Bullying and Sexual Harassment Management to curb misconduct in schools. Experts, however, deemed it as insufficient, arguing that the enforcement of a specific anti-bullying law is vital to instill a sense of fear in bullies, prompting them to cease bullying whether in physical, verbal or cyber form.

Lawyer Muhammad Akram Abdul Aziz told Bernama the MOE guidelines alone are not sufficient as they only assist schools in managing bullying cases.

"In my opinion, enforcement (and meting out appropriate punishment) is important to teach the perpetrators a lesson and instill fear in them so that they don't easily resort to bullying," he said.

#### Verbal, non-verbal aspects

He said currently, the Penal Code is only applied in cases of extreme bullying which results in the victim suffering injuries or dying.

He said it is disheartening that many people are still unaware

# Calls for specific law to address bullying



that bullying also encompasses verbal and non-verbal aspects. Verbal includes mocking, teasing or insulting a person based on their physical appearance, while non-verbal abuse is expressed through signals or body language.

He said societal perception and understanding of bullying are often limited to physical violence, thereby denying those facing verbal or non-verbal bullying their right to genuine redress.

"This is why I believe an anti-bullying law is essential because it provides a more comprehensive approach to helping victims subjected to the actions of bullies that mock them, spread rumours about them or call them using derogatory names, as well as victims subjected to non-verbal expressions like glaring, cynical smiles and so forth," he said.

He said such acts of bullying cannot be taken lightly as they can have an impact on the victim's self-esteem and confidence, which can stretch into adulthood, even though he or she was not bullied physically.

"(The absence of an anti-bullying law) is the reason why many people feel most victims of bullying think there's no place for them to go to or feel there's no point in making a complaint," he said.

Dr Mohamad Naquiddin Dahamat Azam, an associate researcher at the Institute for Social Science Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia, also sees a need for Malaysia to enact an anti-bullying law.

He said to address bullying in its totality, it must be regarded as a criminal act that warrants appropriate punishment.

"The absence of a specific law related to bullying in this country poses a challenge to efforts to put a stop to bullying. The existing legal provisions (related to bullying) focus more on meting out severe penalties for offences that result in physical injuries; however, the punishment for verbal bullying is considered rather mild," he said.

Pointing to the Minor Offences Act 1955, Mohamad Naquiddin said those convicted under this

law for verbal bullying, including threatening and insulting, are imposed a paltry fine not exceeding RM100.

"However, verbal bullying is known to have severe effects on a victim, so is the punishment considered proportionate?"

His views were shared by crime analyst Shahul Hamid Abdul Rahim who said having a specific law to curb bullying will "close the space and opportunities for such crimes to occur".

#### Don't hide bullying cases

He said residential schools should reconsider organising orientation programmes for new students to get to know their seniors as these sessions enable bullies to identify their "potential victims".

"Since some of the senior students themselves were bullied (in the past), they may wish to perpetuate the activity. This is why I'm proposing that the orientation programme be reviewed and adapted according to the current

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situation," he said.

Commenting on reports that the elite school in Kuala Kangsar did not want the recent bullying case to be publicised for fear it might tarnish its reputation, Shahul Hamid said all school authorities must take responsibility for bullying incidents that occur on their premises.

Dr Norsafatul Aznin A. Razak, a senior lecturer at the Department of Educational Psychology and Counselling at Universiti Malaya, said school authorities that conceal bullying incidents can be likened to neglecting the well-being of their students.

"This is because every student has the right to feel safe and schools should ensure their safety," she said, adding that schools should have clear procedures for reporting, investigating and handling bullying cases.

"It is essential for them to implement programmes to prevent bullying. Parents must also be vigilant and assess whether their children have the potential to be bullied so that they can be assisted should such incidents occur," she said.

Mohamad Naquiddin, meanwhile, urged the community including parent-teacher associations (PTAs) to play a proactive role in creating a generation that can put an end to the bullying culture.

"We need the community to be actively involved in actions to stamp out bullying. PTAs can also implement programmes to stop bullying in schools, including anti-bullying campaigns," he added. - BERNAMA