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It's not a 'GAS'ing game

In conjunction with Firefighter's International Day this Thursday, Sunday Star talks to the Malaysian Fire and Rescue Department, experts and regulatory bodies about keeping homes safe from kitchen fires and gas blasts.

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GAS and oil stoves are among the top causes of fires breaking out nationwide.

Fires, Malaysian Fire and Rescue Department (fire and rescue operations division) assistant director-general Datuk Zurkarnain Mohd Kassim cautions, become very dangerous and difficult to control when gas is involved because of the pressurised tank.

"For example, if a wok is on fire, we can use a blanket to put it out. But, if there's gas, the wok will keep burning. And when there's gas, it's scary because you'll hear blast-like sounds. "Even with a fire extinguisher, burning will continue because there's still gas there. So, the most effective way is to cut the gas supply by shutting the valve or pulling off the regulator. But getting to the tank's release valve is very tough in a fire."

That's why, he stresses on proper tank placement in the kitchen. Most Malaysians put it under the stove, making it near impossible to crawl in and get the tank out when tragedy strikes. When the kitchen is on fire, the gas tank is heated, causing the pressure inside to become greater. This, he explains, leads to an explosion.

If it's a small fire, the first thing firefighters do is to extinguish the blaze, cut the gas supply and remove the tank. In apartment blocks where the gas supply is from a 300kg central tank – as opposed to a 14kg tank at home – the danger level is greater.

"Because of the large volume of gas from the central tank, a protected shaft – like those used for telecommunication and electric cables – must be built for the gas pipeline. This is to keep children out.

"It's also crucial to make sure that the pipeline is connected directly from kitchen to kitchen. Unfortunately, I've seen apartments with gas pipes going through the living rooms, bedrooms and access lobby."

He reminds prospective apartment owners to ask about the cooking facilities provided by the developer. If there's a central gas supply,

ask whether the gas line is in a protected shaft.

Gas, he says, is odourless but mercaptan – a pungent-smelling odorant – is added into LPG and piped-in natural gas (NG), so that leaks are detectable.

"As people aren't familiar with the smell of gas, my advice is to open all the doors and window when you smell something funny or out of the ordinary. Most importantly, don't touch any electrical switches because you could trigger a fire.

The most effective way is to cut the gas supply by shutting the valve or pulling off the regulator.



"Even when you open your doors and windows, gas could still be trapped in the house because in terrace houses for example, ventilation may not be that good. And, we're dealing with a 'naughty gas' that doesn't disperse easily even after the supply is cut."

The gas, he says, could remain trapped under the stove or in the drain. So, even turning on the fan or throwing a cigarette butt in the drain, could be fatal.

He recommends waiting until the smell is gone before getting an expert authorised by the Energy Commission to check the tank. While the public can call the fire station for help, the department's main duty is to put out fires and often, "our men are out saving lives", he points out. It's hard for firefighters to come running every time someone calls about a leak.

He reminds consumers to keep their kitchens clean because oily surfaces catch fire easily. He warns against being penny wise and pound foolish when it comes to safety. Don't try DIY tricks as these can be deadly.

"When the gas does not come on, some put weights like heavy books on top of the tank's regulator to fix the pin problem inside, when they should be changing the regulator.

"You must also make sure that everything, including the stove, works properly. And this is down to regular maintenance. How many times in a day do you turn the stove's knob in a year? Don't you think it'll get loose?" he says, adding that it's important for consumers to practise dragging the gas tank around because in the case of a fire, they may have to get it out of the house fast.

The guidelines for gas safety at home, however, comes under the Energy Commission.

The department, he says, only inspects the premises of liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) sellers when they're applying for a licence under the local council and Domestic Trade, Co-operatives and Consumerism Ministry.

"When hawkers or stall owners apply for a council licence to do business, we'll check the premises and ask that they have a fire extinguisher on standby. But with illegal traders, how do we check?"

Lamenting the lack of maintenance of some restaurant kitchens, he shares how easily hot oil catches fire. If the gas tank is below the stove, it'll heat up and cause an explosion easily.

Restaurants, he says, need the department's green light before they can operate. Before any approval is given, they must make sure that the gas is properly placed, the neces-

sary safety valves are in order, and there's a wall surrounding the LPG.

Last year, the department waded through 20,785 technical plans to ensure that buildings here are in line with international safety standards. Over 15,000 premises were inspected for fire safety hazards, which resulted in a collection of fines totalling RM479,260.

While the department doesn't conduct checks on private homes, domestic tanks are smaller so there's time to drag it out before an explosion occurs, Zurkarnain explains.

Last year, the number of lives lost in fires saw a drop of 30% compared to 2015. This, he says, is due in part to better safety awareness among the public.

"The weather has been cooperative lately. No prolonged hot and dry season means less fires."



Don't play with fire

Gas safety tips



- Follow the manufacturer's instructions for the proper usage and maintenance of gas equipment.

- Don't attempt to connect the gas supply yourself. Make sure it's done by the gas licensee/ representative authorised by the licensee.



- Don't place the stove too close to a wall.
- Ensure that there's no smell of gas before lighting the burner.

- Open the windows and doors to ensure good ventilation when cooking.



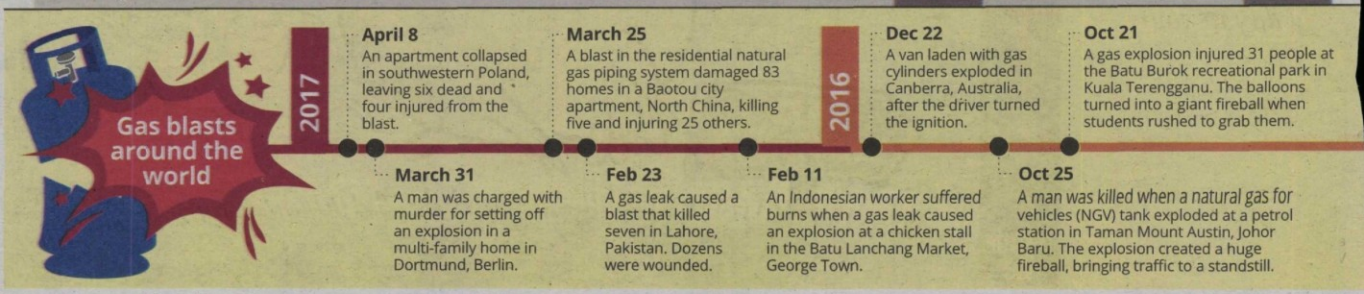
- The proper way to light a non-automatic stove is:
i) Light a match
ii) Point the match at the burner
iii) Slowly turn on the gas
- Don't place flammable items near gas appliances.

- Don't leave the stove unsupervised when cooking.
- Oily surfaces can cause fire. Make sure your gas cooker's surface is clean.
- Always clean the cooker after use.



- Check the gas piping and hose connections frequently for leakage. Use soap foam. Bubbles forming and growing bigger indicate a gas leak.
- Turn off all the gas valves on the gas appliances before leaving the house.

Source: Energy Commission



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He says property valued at RM35.8bil was salvaged nationwide, thanks to the department's quick action. This was 21.4% more than the RM29.5bil recorded in 2015.

The department's average response time last year was 14.95 minutes - an improvement, he proudly shares, compared to 15.02 minutes in 2015.

"Our response time to over 45% of the emergency calls received last year was less than 10 minutes. With 39 new fire stations coming up nationwide on top of the existing 282, we'll do even better," he says, adding that eight 'fire posts' - fire fighting equipment and crew stationed at strategic locations in crowded cities - were set up in KL, Selangor, Malacca and Putrajaya. More will come.

The adoption of the 'offensive fire fighting technique', he says, has also transformed the department's operations team, resulting in quicker fire control and fewer casualties.

"This technique emphasises aggressive, direct attack, to the source of the fire. Because the use of water is minimal, we're able to investigate the cause of the fire faster."

According to the World Health Organization's (WHO) 2016 fact sheet, burns are a global public health problem, accounting for an estimated 265,000 deaths annually. The majority of these occur in low and middle-income countries and almost half occur in South-East Asia. Non-fatal burns are a leading cause of morbidity, including prolonged hospitalisation, disfigurement and disability, often with resulting stigma and rejection.

Usually, in burns involving LPG, the body is charred from waist down, says Zurkarnain. Whereas with NG, the body is charred from waist up. The department, he says, will work with the Health Ministry to beef up its Emergency Medical Rescue Services (EMRS).

The ministry's Medical Emergency Coordination Centre will coordinate ambulances to be deployed from fire stations nationwide when a 999 call for the service is received. The ministry, he adds, will also help train the department's EMRS team. Last year, the team responded to 15,482 cases.

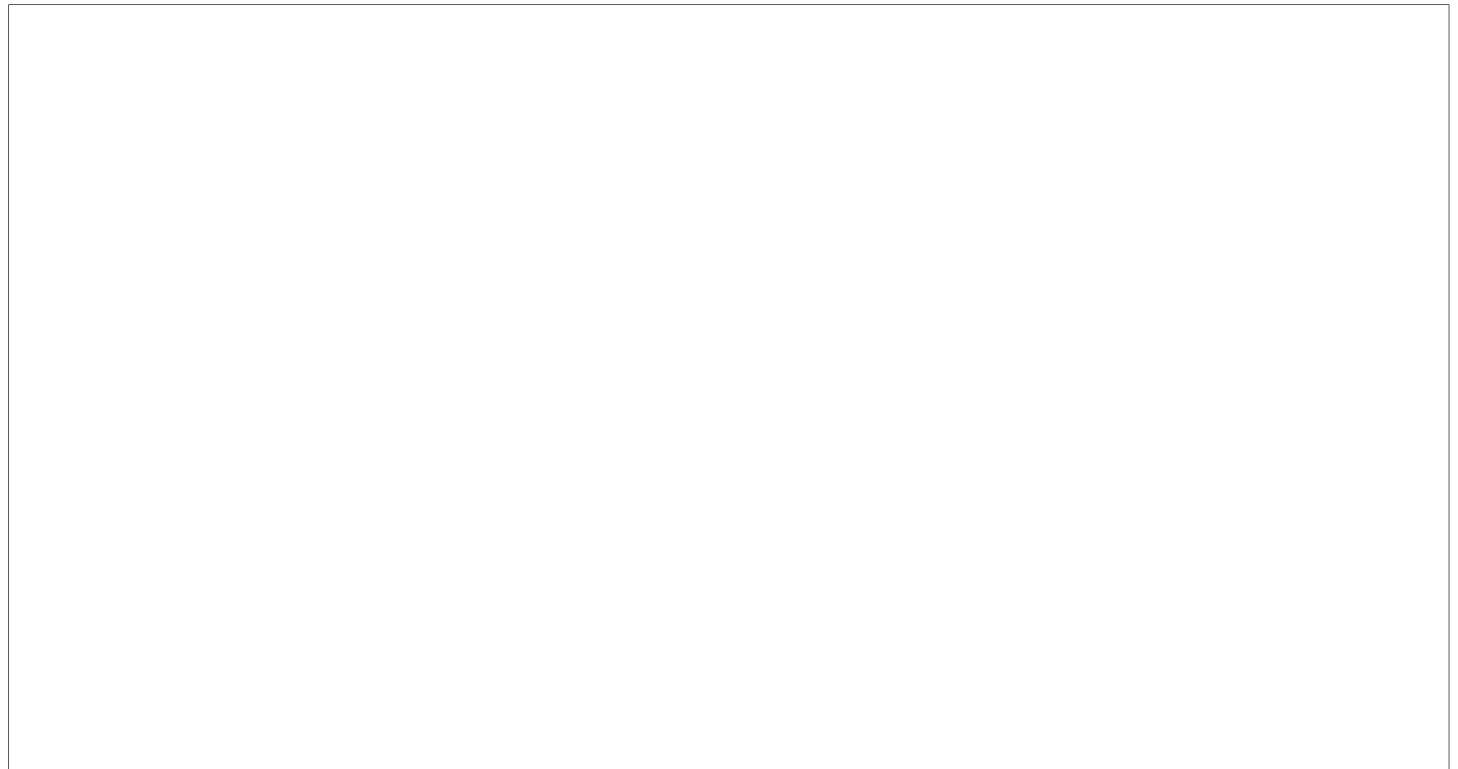
Now registered under the Societies Act, the 350 volunteer fire fighting units (PBS) nationwide will be re-registered under the Malaysian Fire and Rescue Department to improve and transform its management. This, however, would require the amendment of the Fire Services Act 1988 (Act 341), he says, adding that 15,000 members are registered with the PBS. These measures, he shares, are among the year's plans to improve the department's effectiveness.

In March, Urban Wellbeing, Housing and Local Government Minister Tan Sri Noh Omar announced that the department received RM206,100,000 under the 11th Malaysia Plan. As the task of firefighters has evolved, the machineries needed have to match accordingly, he said.

The first of two new heavy lift helicopters acquired by the department is expected to arrive next month while the other is set to be delivered next year, says Zurkarnain. The department also purchased equipment for the hazardous-material emergency response team at the Pengerang petroleum hub in Johor and 19 aerial ladder platforms for fire stations around the country.

"Abang Bomba and I Love You on TV helped Malaysians better understand the life and duties of a firefighter. Hopefully, we can have a film out this year."

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Aug 21
An explosion caused by a gas tank leak, blew off the roof of yong tau foo seller Ee Kok Meng's house in Meru, Klang. He suffered severe burns. His wife died.

April 18
A Myanmar national was killed, and five others injured, in a gas-triggered blast on a tanker in Butterworth, Penang.

April 5
Eight employees of two F&B outlets were injured in Mid Valley Megamall, KL. The incident was caused by blasts in the liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) system.

April 15
Lawyer Eileyn Chua suffered 80% burns when a gas leak caused an explosion in the family's double-storey house in Sungai Nibong, George Town. Ninety percent of the lower floor was damaged.

July 30
A fire broke out at one of the transformers in the Petronas LNG Complex in Bintulu - the world's largest liquefied natural gas (LNG) plant, causing a mass evacuation of workers.

Oct 1
Some 90 people were injured, five of them seriously, in a gas explosion at a cafe in Velez, Madrid.

Be safe, not sorry

If you smell gas (a smell similar to 'rotten eggs'), take these precautionary measures:

- Open all windows and doors so the gas can escape.
- Ensure that the gas appliance valve and the gas valve on the gas pipe connected to the hose, is turned off.
- Turn off the gas valve at the meter and inform the licensee immediately.
- Don't turn on, or off, any electrical switches.
- Don't light a fire (eg: with matches/lighters).
- Don't smoke.
- Don't use your handphone in gas-filled premises.
- Evacuate all occupants.

Source: Energy Commission (www.st.gov.my/index.php/en/consumer/gas/gas-safety-tips)