

HAWKER CENTRE CLEANING SAGA CONTINUES

Minister lets fly at WP MPs

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HE LABELLED a Member of Parliament's (MP) actions arrogant and another MP's statements as misleading.

Dr Vivian Balakrishnan had strong words for his Parliamentary colleagues Sylvia Lim and Pritam Singh, both of Aljunied-Hougang-Punggol East Town Council (AHPETC).

That's how bad things have turned out in the feud between the National Environment Agency (NEA) and AHPETC.

Dr Balakrishnan is the Minister for the Environment and Water Resources and NEA comes under its umbrella.

The saga stemmed from the scheduled cleaning of the hawker centre at Block 538 on Bedok North Street 3.

In the past, the town council would clean the whole hawker centre, including the high areas, which is anything more than 2.5m high.

But in March, the hawkers said they were told by contractors engaged by AHPETC that they would have to pay for scaffolding for high-area cleaning. They never had to before.

Mr Singh, the AHPETC vice-chairman, said AHPETC had not told hawkers to pay extra.

Yes, the hawkers were told to pay up, NEA said, before describing Mr Singh's statements as "misleading and inaccurate". (See report at right.)

The truth

Yesterday, Dr Balakrishnan said in a statement: "Either Mr Pritam Singh OR the hawkers are telling the truth. It is obvious that the hawkers are speaking the truth."

"It is arrogant and wrong of Ms Sylvia Lim to make a political attack on NEA officers for simply doing their duty and for protecting the hawkers."

"I ask AHPETC to cooperate with NEA, consult closely with the hawkers and fulfil its obligations."

He said the civil servants in NEA are duty-bound to protect public hygiene and to ensure that hawkers are treated fairly.

Yesterday, NEA also released a series of documents and Ms Lim issued a statement in response. (See report at far right.)

She released an e-mail from NEA that had said "the Hawkers Association will make the necessary arrangements with their contractors on the scaffold erection/dismantling during the spring cleaning".

She said NEA had not clarified whether AHPETC had asked the hawkers to pay any additional charges for the cleaning.

Attributing to the AHPETC a quotation from the cleaning contractor was misleading, she said,

WORDS:
 (Left, from top) Minister for the Environment and Water Resources, Dr Vivian Balakrishnan; and WP MPs Ms Sylvia Lim and Mr Pritam Singh.

ST, BT FILE PICTURES



once again accusing the NEA of being "politically motivated to tarnish the reputation of AHPETC".

So why the strong statements?

It started with NEA accusing AHPETC - which is run by Workers' Party (WP) - of failing to clean the hawker centre. Not too long ago, it was accused of being slow in collecting arrears during the AIM saga.

Nominated MP and Singapore Management University law professor Eugene Tan said: "The WP's key priority in town council management is to demonstrate that it is more than up to the task of running a town council, in particular a mega-size one."

"A key plank of its political campaign before the next General Election is to remove any doubt that voters will be shortchanged in a WP-run town council. So any local town council issue that could impact upon how its competency, effectiveness and efficacy will be strenuously defended by WP as it is seen as something within its control."

Prof Tan Ern Ser of National University of Singapore agreed, saying: "Any allegations that it has not lived up to such expectations can erode its political capital and moral authority."

And for NEA and now the Minister to weigh in?

Said Prof Eugene Tan: "In both AIM and the NEA matters, WP has sought to characterise the actions against WP's interests as being politically motivated."

He added that WP has been suggesting the government machinery is geared towards tripping AHPETC.

"That only ups the ante and makes it imperative for the government agency to respond just as robustly to show that its actions are not politicised. Government agencies will be very determined to defend themselves because it strikes at the heart of their independence and legitimacy."

What do the hawkers think?

The New Paper visited the hawker centre at Block 538, Bedok North Street 3 yesterday.

For Mr Tan Jiak Meng, who runs a fishball noodles stall, the whole saga erupted after a misunderstanding.

The 52-year-old said: "We were very angry in March and we looked for the hawker committee to tell the NEA. We've never had anyone come to us to take money for scaffolding (for cleaning ceilings)."

Madam Ng, who is in her 50s and runs a drinks stall, said: "I think it was a misunderstanding. We were very angry when we paid in March but they didn't clean up."

"The hawkers have asked if the town council would help us pay for the scaffolding next year to make up for this year."

Mr Sin, a 35-year-old wonton noodles seller, said he wished the MPs had visited them.

"The Workers' Party should have communicated more with us. So far they haven't visited, haven't talked to us at all," he said.

"Since the residents here really support them, they should come down, not take this support for granted."

Dr Vivian Balakrishnan said the whole saga has been a completely unnecessary distraction caused by Aljunied-Hougang-Punggol East Town Council (AHPETC) and its managing agent FMSS.

He said: "All Town Councils have always done routine spring-cleaning of hawker centres."

"There is no excuse for AHPETC to delay the current cleaning programme."

"The safety of the public must remain our paramount concern."

Describing hawkers as "honest, hardworking people just trying to make a living", he said there is no reason to charge them more for cleaning the ceiling.

He added: "There is no reason to disrupt their business."

"The hawkers have been consistent and truthful throughout this entire episode."



TNP PICTURE: NURJANNAH ZULKIFLI
 VOCAL: Mr Tan Jiak Meng.

THE EXCHANGES

What it's about:

ATL Maintenance set up scaffoldings in March but only to cover the stalls with canvas during the cleaning.

Hawkers were then told by the contractor they had to pay extra to erect scaffolding to clean the area above 2.5m.

The hawkers were upset by that demand.

Feb 19

AHPETC contractor, ATL Maintenance, released quotation for market stalls high-rise cleaning at Block 538, Bedok North Street 3. The quotation was addressed to the Hawkers Association representative.

May 8

Letters were sent from Block 511 Hawkers Association's secretary Chan Kheng Heng to MP Muhd Faisal Abd Manap, and from Mr Faisal to AHPETC. Both appealed for AHPETC to assist with the proper and complete cleaning of the hawker centre. Letters were provided to NEA by Mr Chan.

June 3

Petition letters were written by the hawkers of Block 511 and Block 538, informing the media of their plight.

NEA said the documents show that the hawkers of Block 538 had expected the hawker centre to be cleaned as per normal during the spring-cleaning exercise in March.

NEA SAYS:

NEA said in a statement: "This was why they had made arrangements for the period, including putting up canvas as indicated in the e-mail our officer sent on Feb 7, 2013, to AHPETC."

NEA said that according to AHPETC, its contract with ATL included cleaning of the entire premises. But the quotation that ATL submitted to the hawkers of Block 538 showed that the contractor wanted the hawkers to pay them for the scaffolding and cleaning of the high areas separately.

High areas are above 2.5m. This is work which falls within the responsibility of the town council itself, said NEA.

AHPETC then said the hawkers must have asked for this quotation themselves, which the hawkers denied.

Mr Faisal wrote an appeal against the extra charges to AHPETC on behalf of the hawkers of Block 511.

The hawkers submitted petition letters to the media on June 3.