

Safety of passengers a priority

Operators have until 2015 to equip commercial boats with new safety features

SIBU: All operators of commercial passenger boats in the country have been given until 2015 to equip their vehicles with additional safety features.

Deputy Transport Minister Datuk Abdul Aziz Kiprawi said the new safety features included having extra exits for passengers and a compartment for luggage and other items.

Presently all express boats do not have such luggage compartment. Passengers' bags and other belongings have to be placed inside and on the roof of the boat.

Abdul Aziz stressed that operators should not be too worried about spending on renovating their boats.

"I assure you that it (cost) will not be that expensive as it only involves making slight changes," he said at a press conference after officiating at the national-level World Maritime Day celebration here yesterday.

Adding on, he said his ministry was undertaking such measure to ensure the safety of boat passengers.

"Boat terminals in the state namely in Kuching, Tanjung Manis, Sibul, Kuala Baram, Limbang, Song, Kapit, and Sarikei, attend to about 1.6 million passengers a year. Of the 300 to 500 boats and vessels plying the riv-

ers, 50% are passenger boats. This shows that water transportation is an important mode of travelling from one area to another in Sarawak," he said.

The May 25 express boat tragedy in Belaga served as a grim reminder on the importance of riverine safety for passengers, he underlined.

Abdul Aziz also said Sibul Express Boat Terminal here had been chosen for a safety awareness campaign.

Throughout the five-day campaign which began last Friday, joint operations are being conducted by the Marine Department, Sarawak Rivers Board and Marine Police to ensure that all passenger boats would strictly adhere to safety regulations such as having valid operating licence and not overloading their.

"Since it is the school holiday, a large number of people will be using boats to go back to their respective villages. As such we hope the campaign would meet its objectives," he said.

Earlier, state Marine Department director Zahidin Dor said for the first 10 months of this year, a total of 20 accidents involving vessels and passenger boats were recorded.

"The department is always committed to creating awareness of the



Safety first: Abdul Aziz presenting a life jacket to a boat operator at the programme in Sibul.

importance of safety among passengers aboard river ferries, express boats and small boats. It has organised an awareness campaign in Peninsular Malaysia. In Sarawak, the first of the two programmes was

conducted in June during the Gawai season," he added.

Zahidin also said his department also held a competency course for 35 juragans (skippers) of express boats plying the Kapit-Belaga and Kapit-

Putai routes on recently.

On enforcement, Abdul Aziz said 557 inspections had been conducted on boats and vessels from January to October, involving issuance of 25 compounds for various offences.