

Child Sexual Crimes Bill to be tabled in Parliament next week

PETALING JAYA: The Cabinet has approved a draft of the Sexual Offences Against Children Bill, with Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Seri Azalina Othman Said saying it will be tabled in Parliament next week.

The Bill takes into account new sexual offences against children and penalties for offenders, on top of offences covered in existing legislation, she said in a statement.

"This Bill is important to address the seriousness of sexual offences committed against children in Malaysia.

"It also aims to enhance the protection of children against sexual crimes and protect their welfare," Azalina said.

She thanked Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak for forming a special task force to address the issue of sexual crimes against children.

Azalina said the national seminar, Child Sexual Crimes: Stop It!, on March 13 and 14 opened the eyes of many on the need for the Act to provide a safe and healthy environment for our children.

In a statement yesterday, the

United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (Unicef) said that while it was all for the proposed Bill, it stressed that child marriages should not be included in it.

This is because integrating child marriages into the Bill would take a strictly punitive approach and would likely drive the practice further underground, said Unicef Malaysia representative Marianne Clark-Hattingh.

Her statement came after a call by Kulai MP Teo Nie Ching for the issue of child marriages to be

addressed in the Bill.

Instead, Clark-Hattingh proposed that child marriages be dealt with via proposed amendments to the Child Act, the Law Reform (Marriage and Divorce) Act, and within Islamic Family Law.

"Addressing child marriages requires a comprehensive and broad perspective, and the recognition of various social, cultural and economic factors that contribute to the perpetuation of the practice," said Clark-Hattingh.

She said complications from pregnancy and childbirth were the

leading cause of death among girls aged 15 to 19 worldwide, accounting for some 50,000 deaths each year.

"Unicef favours the approach to raise the age of marriage to 18, without exceptions," she said.

The Women, Family and Community Development Ministry has stated that there were 9,061 child marriages from 2010 to 2015.

Amendments to the Child Act took place in January without provisions to ban child marriages.

For the full Unicef statement, go to *The Star Online*.