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The cable theft challenge

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Hefty fines not the complete answer in dealing with 'economic saboteurs'

THE proposed amendments to the law by the government to impose fines up to RM100,000 to curb cable theft are a welcome step, but they should form only a part of a broader strategy to protect critical infrastructure. Rail cable theft is not a petty crime. It has the potential to cripple public transport networks, compromise passenger safety, disrupt economic activity and undermine confidence in the country's rail system. The government is right to increase the penalties to reflect the gravity of the offence. However, deterrence depends not only on harsher punishment but also on the certainty of detection and prosecution. If theft syndicates continue to operate with little fear of being caught, higher fines alone will have limited impact. Focus on raising the certainty of detection and prosecution as well, we say.

Granted, the current RM1,000 fine is a drop in the bucket. Little wonder the cable thieves have caused RM50 million in losses for the rail companies Keretapi Tanah Melayu Bhd, Prasarana Malaysia Bhd and the East Coast Rail Link. But will a RM100,000 maximum fine be enough to deter organised theft syndicates? Certainly not. If we are dealing with petty criminals, perhaps they will think twice before committing the next cable theft. These are organised theft syndicates for whom a RM100,000 fine is a trivial sum. And they are a sophisticated lot, keeping a keen eye on the global copper market. If there were more than 100 cases for each of the last two years, there will be more this year as copper prices are reported to be soaring aggressively, driven by artificial intelligence and electrification demand, supply constraints and geopolitical risks. Being stolen items, the cables do not fetch market prices. Still, 200 metres of stolen rail cable is said to fetch about RM5,000 to RM10,000 in the black market, according to a media report.

Where do the syndicates sell them? To scrap metal dealers, obviously to the unscrupulous ones. Without them cable theft becomes less "profitable". This is why industry players and experts have called on the authorities to go after them, labelling them "economic saboteurs". Indeed, they are. It is not just the cables that get stolen, but an entire economy is robbed. It is not a wild accusation. According to a media report in June last year, a syndicate had sold stolen cables belonging to Telekom Malaysia and Tenaga Nasional Bhd in 23 transactions since 2024 to several scrapyards in Semenyih, Selangor worth RM700,000. Experts have a point when they call for a shift from focusing on thieves to strengthening scrap metal oversight. What we need is an all-encompassing intelligence-led strategy to dismantle organised criminal gangs such as cable theft syndicates. Not old thinking. Nor old laws such as the Second-Hand Dealers Act 1946.

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