

# 'No abuse at Mercy homes'

## Witnesses refute allegations at Suhakam hearing

By Seema Viswanathan

**KUALA LUMPUR, Fri:** Thirteen people refuted allegations of abuse and neglect made against Mercy Welfare Society at a Human Rights Commission (Suhakam) hearing today.

Society president Indra Shan, who was summoned by the commission, did not testify but the four-hour session heard the testimonies of 26 witnesses.

Maureen Barthelot, who has known Indra for a year, said: "I can say with certainty that there has been no physical abuse of any of the residents, including the children."

"The conditions in the homes can be improved if there are sufficient funds and more organised help."

She said she solicits funds for a variety of charitable organisations and always thoroughly investigates the background of these organisations.

On July 13, *The Sun* reported that 16 children had been rescued from the home by ex-volunteers because they had been abused and neglected.

The children, as well as mentally ill adults and the elderly at the society's six homes, were allegedly under-fed, physically and mentally abused and imprisoned.

Suhakam has conducted two hearings to date on the case, during which testimonies were given by ex-volunteers, the children who formerly lived in the home, their parents, the Social Welfare Department and the Registrar of Societies.

At today's hearing, Indra arrived with her son Daniel Paul and four



Indra, Daniel (left) and one of their lawyers, Gerald, at the hearing. — SUNFIX BY MUNIF MONO MANZUKI

lawyers.

One of them, **Jerald Gomez**, got into a disagreement with ex-volunteer G. Rajasingham, also a lawyer, over points of law.

Inquiry chairman Prof Datuk Hamdan Adnan had to remind them that this was not a court trial and threatened to remove them if they continued interrupting.

Another witness, Sitiviganan Vadivelu, who has known Indra for five years, said he used to pro-

vide transport whenever the president wanted to pick up people who were sick, dirty and hungry from the streets.

"I have on many occasions driven these people with Indra to the Kuala Lumpur Hospital for whatever medical treatment that the hospital was willing to give.

"My wife and I also spend time with the residents almost every fortnight, talking to them and I often buy provisions for

them. The residents have never complained of any abuse or neglect," Sitiviganan said.

Kindergarten principal Ammini Cherian Verghese, who taught some of the children for two weeks, refuted claims that the children were fed rotten food.

"I observed that these children had good snacks every day, like butter cookies, wafers and buns. They were well-fed, well-looking after, very active children," Ammini said.

## 'Mercy not run according to registrar's requirements'

**KUALA LUMPUR, Fri:** The secretary of Mercy Welfare Society admitted today that the home has not been run according to requirements of the Registrar of Societies.

Ernest Miller told the Malaysian Human Rights Commission inquiry that the welfare home started as a church project supported by well-wishers.

Although it was registered as a society in April 1999, Mercy Welfare Society opened a bank account only last September, he said.

"Sometime in August, there were some good articles about us in the papers and donations came in. That was when we realised how serious this was becoming, so we opened an account and put the money there," he said.

Miller said society pres-

ident Indra Shan had always been open to the public about her accounts.

He said the accounts are being audited by an independent auditor.

"We have since October 2000 until June collected approximately RM68,000 and have spent approximately RM45,000 up to June 2001 and almost all of it to date."

He said food stocks and money at the home would last up to only next month.

"After that we will have to close the homes and send the people back to the streets."

He said publicised allegations of abuse and neglect made against the home by former volunteers had destroyed its reputation.

"People have stopped sending food or aid to the society and the homeless residents."

## We will insist ministry follows procedures, says Hamdan

**KUALA LUMPUR, Fri:** Suhakam member Prof Datuk Hamdan Adnan criticised the parliamentary secretary to the National Unity and Social Development Ministry today for saying that Suhakam's inquiry into the Mercy Welfare Society has no bearing on government action.

"He can say what he wants. We only insist that he follows the procedures when deciding whether the society's application to register as a home should be approved."

"If he doesn't follow procedures, we can ask him in parliament later

why the ministry did not follow Suhakam's recommendations," he said, responding to Datuk S. Veerasingam's comments yesterday.

Veerasingam had said that the results of Suhakam's inquiry will not influence the ministry's approval or rejection of the application.

Hamdan responded after a hearing into allegations of abuse and neglect made against Mercy Home.

Regardless of the results of the inquiry, he said, the effect is that the welfare system in the country must be reviewed.