

 KUALA LUMPUR: THEY gave their all for the nation yet Malaysia's heroic paralympic athletes -- who had finished sixth out of 51 countries in last year's Asian Para Games in Guangzhou, China -- got the unkindest cut of all. Instead of being treated as equals with the country's able-bodied athletes, they were subjected to a humiliating 70 per cent slash in cash incentives by the Youth and Sports Ministry. Special athletes used to earn RM80,000 for a gold medal, RM40,000 for silver and RM20,000 for bronze at the regional Games. They were unceremoniously trimmed to RM24,000 for gold, RM12,000 (silver) and RM6,000 (bronze). The incentives were presented to them in April by Youth and Sports Minister Datuk Seri Ahmad Shabery Cheek through the ministry's funding arm, the National Sports Council (NSC), at an awards ceremony in Kuching, Sarawak. Shabery was reported then as saying the amount was "reasonable at the moment". However, the disabled athletes say the issue is not about the money. Founder and president of the Malaysian Disabled Persons Sports Association, Lee Sheng Chew, said all they wanted was equal recognition for their efforts. "We came from an era where there were no financial returns. We are happy to get some form of support from the government. We are in sports to boost our confidence and be at par with the rest. But when you've been getting one plate of rice and suddenly you only get two spoonfuls with no explanation, it's quite disheartening. Aren't we supposed to be treated equally? 'Justice should be for everybody' Having represented the nation numerous times, the 57-year-old blind athlete was among the medal-winners at the recent Games, having won a bronze in shot putt. He said the athletes were disappointed at not being told beforehand about the slashed incentives. "We were not consulted or told. It caught us by surprise. Tell us if their coffers are dry. Be transparent. We would like to know the truth. But the word on the street is that we are lower in standard and don't deserve the money. It's sad." He said he had highlighted their plight to several non-governmental organisations. He is also planning to write to the ministry. Lee, who runs a massage parlor in Brickfields, hopes he and his teammates receive equal treatment. "Justice should be for everybody." In the Games, Malaysia secured nine gold, 13 silver and 23 bronze medals. Swimmer Jamery Siga garnered the most rewards with RM48,000 after winning three silver and two bronze medals.