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ACA confirms investigations (HL)

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GENTING HIGHLANDS, Fri. - The Anti-Corruption Agency is conducting two separate investigations involving Selangor Menteri Besar Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib and his two former aides following the discovery of large amounts of cash in Brisbane and Shah Alam respectively last month.

"Both investigations are under way. However, these cases are not connected," ACA director-general Datuk Shafee Yahya told the New Straits Times at the Awana Golf and Country Resort today.

He said the agency would issue a Press statement when the investigations were completed.

Although the NST persistently asked for the identities of the two former aides and the person who had lodged a report against them, Shafee stood his ground.

Meanwhile, ACA's planning and policy co-ordination unit head, Abu Kassim Mohamed, said the agency started investigating the Selangor Menteri Besar after a report was lodged by Pas Youth secretary Mahfuz Omar with the Selangor ACA in Shah Alam on Dec 29.

This came in the wake of the admission by Muhammad that the money in foreign currencies equivalent to RM2.4 million which he failed to declare at the Brisbane airport while en route to New Zealand on Dec 23 belonged to his three brothers, Datuk Raduan, Datuk Othman and Hassan.

The brothers wanted him to buy a property on the Gold Coast on their behalf, he had told a Press conference in Shah Alam on Monday.

Muhammad, who was stopped at the airport by Customs officers, claimed he did not know that it was a violation of section 15 of Australia's Financial Transaction Act.

He was produced in the Brisbane's magistrate court the following day, and entered no plea. His case is set to be heard on March 21.

To date, his brothers have not come forward to collaborate what was made public by Muhammad.

ACA sources said the agency was not looking into the foreign exchange violation, but to corroborate the Menteri Besar's statement on the source of the money.

This would mean interviewing all parties concerned, including Muhammad and his brothers, they said.

On Wednesday, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad had made it clear that there was nothing to stop the agency from investigating Muhammad.

Dr Mahathir had also declined to say whether he was satisfied with Muhammad's explanation. "I will leave that to you to judge. I don't want to be biased," he told reporters at the roll-out of the one millionth Proton car, several hours before Muhammad's Press conference.

In the latest development, the NST learnt that the investigation into Muhammad's former aides' case was connected with the conversion of a 40-hectare forest area in Bukit Sungai Putih, Hulu Langat.

One of them was found with about RM1.5 million in his car when an ACA team from its headquarters in Pesiaran Duta went to his house in Shah Alam last month. This man is now a company manager.

The land, which was originally part of the Bukit Sungai Putih forest reserve, has been earmarked for mixed development after a logging licence was given out to a company.

Both men were believed to have been picked up in the middle of last

month but were subsequently released on police bail. They are expected to be called up for questioning again.

Investigation into this case began in November last year following a report lodged with the ACA headquarters. This was confirmed by Abu Kassim who did not want to identify the complainant.

Apparently, the land in question was gazetted as a forest reserve in 1972, but the State Executive Council took a decision in 1990 to degazette it. The decision then was to allow logging and for the land to be developed into a commercial area.

ACA sources said all parties who were involved in the decision-making would be called to give their statements. "They will include the present and past Menteri Besar, former and current State Forestry Department officers, and State executive councillors, past and present," said a source.

In Shah Alam, Selangor Forestry Department director Razani Ujang said his department was co-operating fully with the ACA.

Today, Razani was interviewed by three ACA officers for about an hour. He declined to disclose what transpired, but said they had questioned him concerning the forest reserve.

Meanwhile, Muhammad has declined to comment on the ACA's move to investigate his former aides.

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