

BERNAMA NEWS DIGEST

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Several newspapers gave prominence to Datuk Seri Dr. Mahathir's statement that the Anti-Corruption Agency (ACA) can still call up Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib in connection with his arrest in Brisbane for allegedly failing to declare an equivalent of RM2.4 million in cash before leaving Australia on Dec 22.

The news item was top story in THE SUN and WATAN.

Reports quoted the prime minister as saying that the ACA could still do so if it felt that the Selangor Menteri Besar Selangor needed to be investigated regarding the case.

"That is the ACA's prerogative," he said at a news conference at the Terengganu Menteri Besar's residence in Kuala Terengganu yesterday. The prime minister is on a two-day private visit to the state.

Asked whether he was satisfied with Muhammad's explanation on the ownership of the money and his reason for having the money with him, the prime minister said: "I have no reason to reject his explanation. Muhammad has all the documents to support his explanation, including the lawyer's letter (relating to the purchase of property in Australia)." -- more

Newspapers reported Malaysian ambassador Ahmad Mokhtar Selat, who was released last week after 11 days of captivity by Peruvian rebels in Lima, returned home Wednesday and vowed to go back to the Peruvian capital after a short rest to continue his duties.

"Yes, I will return to Lima," he was quoted as saying to a packed news conference on his arrival at the Sultan Abdul Aziz Shah airport in Subang, near Kuala Lumpur.

The envoy's return starts the new year for Malaysia on a happy note.

Ahmad Mokhtar, accompanied by his wife, Jelial Ghalim, daughter Melor Hidayah, Foreign Minister Datuk Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and Malaysian ambassador to Brazil Datuk Zainal Abidin Zain, arrived Subang at about 1pm after nearly 30 hours on board Malaysia Airlines' flight MH91 from Los Angeles.

Ahmad Mokhtar said the 11-day ordeal had robbed him of his freedom "but with the blessings from Allah, I am now a free man again".

"I cherish this freedom. I am really very happy to be back home after the 11-day ordeal," he said.

And to his colleagues in Wisma Putra, Ahmad Mokhtar said: "I hope they will not encounter this bad experience."

Ahmad Mokhtar regarded the incident as "a challenge or a risk which Wisma Putra officers have to face when stationed overseas."

"The social and political system (in other countries) is different...we have to perform our duty for the sake of the country," he added.

He said he had kept an account of his ordeal in his diary and might write a book on it.

Meanwhie, Abdulah told reporters that he, Ahmad Mokhtar and Zainal Abidin had handed Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's letter of thanks and appreciation to Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori.

"I told Fujimori that the prime minister and the people of Malaysia were thankful and appreciated his efforts in securing Ahmad Mokhtar's release," he said.

He said the incident served as a lesson in that, for example, the good relations between Malaysia and Peru had helped resolve certain problems in times of need. -- more

Malaysia will step up security at its missions overseas, especially in countries identified as having high security risk, Foreign Minister Datuk Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said Wednesday.

The news items was given a wider coverage by all newspapers especially English and Malay ones.

However, the hostage-taking incident in Lima would not affect Wisma Putra's procedure of posting officers overseas, he was quoted as saying to reporters at the Sultan Abdul Aziz Shah Airport in Subang yesterday.

Abdullah said the improved security would not mean assigning personal bodyguards to Malaysian diplomats, except in special circumstances.

He had just accompanied Malaysian Ambassador to Peru, Encik Ahmad Mokhtar Selat, back following his release by Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement guerillas in Lima.

Adbullah said the Lima incident had provided valuable lessons to the government on the safety of its officers overseas.

He and Ahmad Mokhtar will submit a full report on the incident to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad. -- more

Quoting Deputy Home Minister Ong Ka Ting newspaper reports said the government will not extend the exercise to legalise illegal foreign workers in the country.

BERITA HARIAN, TAMIL NESAN and MALAYSIA NANBAN headlined the news item.

He said that stern action would be taken against illegal foreign workers not registered with the Immigration Department during the exercise which ended Tuesday.

"The government has repeatedly stated that although emphasis is given on economic growth, we cannot compromise on matters which affect the security of the country," he told reporters at the Immigration Department in Kuala Lumpur Wednesday.

He said that during the legalisation exercise, some 300,000 foreign workers were registered and of this between 150,000 and 180,000 were registered at the Immigration Department headquarters here, 80,000 in Johor and 25,000 each here, in Selangor, Perak, Pulau Pinang and Pahang.

Under the Immigration Act, employers who employ a foreign worker without permit can be fined up to RM10,000 or jailed for five years. Those employing more than five illegal foreign workers are liable to be sentenced to a mandatory jail term of up to six months.

Members of syndicates bringing in illegal foreign workers can be sentenced to a mandatory jail term of up to two years and six strokes of the rotan.

"Do not say that we do not issue warnings...we have given several reminders. The government cannot continue to compromise as this may cause them to think we are not serious," he said.

Foreign workers who had been registered could not switch jobs and would be deemed as being without no permits if they do so, he said.

He said there were two million foreign workers in the country. --

Newspaper gave a wider coverage to the news item that the National Registration Department and the Immigration Department will start to implement the staggered working hours concept today.

Home Ministry Secretary-General Datuk Samsudin Osman said in a statement Wednesday that counters of the National Registration Department involved are at the headquarters in Wisma Pendaftaran and Federal Building in Petaling Jaya, the Federal Territory National Registration office at Campbell Complex and the Selangor National Registration office in Shah Alam.

The counters of the Immigration Department involved are at the Immigration headquarters in Pusat Bandar Damansara, the Federal Territory Immigration office in Wilayah Complex and Pusat Bandar Damansara, the Selangor Immigration office in Shah Alam, the Petaling Jaya Immigration office in Lien Hoe building, the Kajang Immigration office and the Port Klang Immigration office.

The two departments are among five government departments which will implement the concept a six-month trial period.

The other three departments are the Public Services Department, the Road Transport Department and the Royal Customs and Excise Department.

Under the concept, the departments would operate from 7.30am to 6.30pm from Monday to Thursday and from 7.30am to 12.15pm and 2.45pm to 6.30pm on Friday.

On Saturdays, the departments will operate from 7.30am to 2pm. --

Newspapers also reported that the self-service at petrol stations that was officially introduced in the Klang Valley Wednesday will be extended to major towns once the system is smoothly implemented.

Places like George Town and Johor Baharu would be next to introduce self-service, reports quoted Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs Minister Datuk Abu Hassan Omar as saying.

The government has set six months for the system to be fully implemented in the Klang Valley, he told reporters after visiting six petrol stations in Subang Jaya in Petaling Jaya yesterday.

Newspaper reports quoting Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said Maju Holdings Sdn Bhd has been given 51 per cent stake in Perwaja Steel Sdn Bhd, sealing the rescue of the ailing steel company.

The NEW STRAITS TIMES headlined the news item.

The prime minister said the Terengganu Government would continue to hold 19 per cent with the remaining 30 per cent by the Federal Government.

In addition to holding 51 per cent share in Perwaja, Maju Holdings will also be managing the steel company.

He said that under the restructuring of Perwaja which had suffered losses totalling over RM2.8 bilion, the losses would be treated as separate because the government wanted Perwaja to start on a clean slate.

This, he said, meant that all of Perwaja's previous losses were "taken over" by the government which would strive to recover the losses from other sources.

However, he said, the government's move to take over the losses did not mean that it would pump money into Perwaja under the new management.

"We are only taking over the losses," he said. -- more

Newspapers also quoted Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad as saying that the Barisan Nasional should not be over-confident of a victory in the the Pulai Chondong state by-election in Kelantan on Jan 6.

"It is not easy for us to win. As such, I want to remind all parties in the BN to concentrate all their energy on Pulai Chondong," he stressed.

Dr Mahathir, who is also Umno president, also told reporters in Kuala Terengganu yesterday that he did not know why the Barisan Nasional election machinery did not go down to the field full-scale to help the BN candidate, Mohamed Yusoff Hamzah, in the by-election.

"I have issued a directive to all the parties, including Umno members who were formerly with Parti Melayu Semangat 46, to give their cooperation to ensure Mohamed Yusoff's success," he said when asked about the apparent absence of BN leaders, especially from Kelantan, in campaigning for the BN since nomination day on Dec 26.

The Government will study the possibility of replacing the 140 level crossings in the country with flyovers or overhead bridges. The news item was headlined by The STAR.

Reports said the study will explore the possibility of phasing out level crossings through the involvement of the private sector and developers.

Transport Minister Datuk Seri Ling Liong Sik told reporters in Segamat

yesterday that the study should cover the projected cost of building flyovers or smaller overhead bridges, depending on the location and space, at existing level crossings. He said the project could cost between RM3 million and RM 12 million.

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