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Call for help to return confidence to bourse

BARISAN Nasional backbenchers and members of the Opposition must play their part to help return confidence to the Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange and to strengthen the ringgit.

Deputy Finance Minister Datuk Dr Affifuddin Omar, replying to questions on the local bourse and the weakening of the ringgit raised by the members said:

"While the Government accepts there is lack of confidence, as expressed by Opposition leader Lim Kit Siang, we must be calm and address these problems logically."

Lim, who had earlier tried to raise a supplementary question but was turned down by Deputy Speaker Ong Tee Keat, questioned why the Opposition was not given a chance to speak on issues related to the currency and the bourse.

Affifuddin had earlier given lengthy replies to Abdul Rahman Sulaiman (BN-Parit Buntar) and Abdul Aziz Yassin (BN-Muar) on the meeting of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and his deputy Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim with foreign fund managers, in an effort to restore confidence in the local capital and derivative market and the local bourse respectively.

Despite Lim joining the rest of the MPs in trying to attract the attention of the Speaker, he was not allowed to ask supplementary questions.

An upset Lim stood up and asked: "The present crisis is a confidence crisis, and why is the Opposition being denied the chance (to ask questions)?"

Ong then moved on to another question raised by Liew Ah Kim (DAP-Seputih) on Dr Mahathir's announcement of a RM60 billion allocation to help the stock market.

The question had been earlier answered by Affifuddin.

Affifuddin then gave Lim an opportunity to ask his supplementary question, not before Ong interjected by saying: "He (Lim) has no patience. There is still an opportunity for him to ask his question."

Lim then remarked: "It is not that I have no patience but it is the rakyat who has no patience about the currency situation and the local bourse."

He then read an excerpt from the Washington Post, dated Oct 13: "... each time Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir makes an outburst ... the stock market tumbles" and he then flashed stickers in support of Dr Mahathir distributed to all the MPs.

A chorus of BN backbenchers then asked Lim to ask his question and not to make a speech which angered Lim to say: "Adakah ini semua boneka? (Are you all puppets?)"

Affifuddin dismissed Lim's suggestion of the co-relation between what Dr Mahathir said and the weakening of the currency and the local bourse.

"President Suharto, President Fidel Ramos and the Thai Prime Minister did not say anything and they did not even attack currency speculator George Soros ... yet their countries currencies also suffered."

Affifuddin also cited a report from the Herald Tribune which reported that Malaysia's economic fundamentals appeared "smelly".

He said the newspaper publisher was speaking through the "nose and not through the mouth".

Affifuddin then asked: "What is so 'smelly' about our country's economic

fundamentals?"

He described the country's economic fundamentals as strong, with low foreign debt and low inflation rate.

He said the Western media could have just picked on our current account deficit to disrupt Malaysia's strong economic growth.

Earlier, replying to Abdul Aziz, Affifudin said the instability of the currencies in the region had adversely affected the local bourse.

"Foreign investors have stayed away from the local bourse because they were worried of an unstable ringgit and its continued volatility, particularly the thinning of the ringgit's liquidity," he said.

He said the Government was aware of the crisis affecting the local bourse, and had introduced several short and long term measures to counter it.

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