

04/12/1997

Dr M: MB told me official residence was a shambles

Farush Khan; Rashid Yusof; Annie Freeda Cruetz

LANGKAWI, Wed. - Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today Datuk Abu Hassan Omar had told him that he did not move into the official residence soon after his appointment as Selangor Menteri Besar in June 1997 as "the whole thing was in a shambles".

Abu Hassan had stayed in Kuala Lumpur because of the condition of the residence in Bukit Megawati, the Prime Minister said.

He was asked to comment on a report in the front page of today's Utusan Malaysia on the renovation of the Menteri Besar's residence which reportedly cost RM5 million.

Abu Hassan, he said, told him he was going to move in (later) and that the decision (to renovate the residence) was made before all these (economic) problems.

Asked whether he thought the renovation involved a lot of money, Dr Mahathir said:

"Well, I don't know whether it cost a lot of money. You see, we are poor and people have stolen RM30 billion. So we have to live within our means," he said.

On whether he would call for a report on the spending of the RM5 million, Dr Mahathir said: "We will find out."

Asked when Abu Hassan explained to him the reason for the renovation, he said it was before the Menteri Besar left for a trip abroad.

In October, Abu Hassan had gone to Orlando in United States to present to the Sultan of Selangor the shortlisted candidates for the State mufti's post.

Details of the renovation reportedly using allocations under the Menteri Besar and State Secretary's Development Budget 1997 were disclosed by State Exco member Datuk Zainal Dahalan at the State Assembly yesterday.

This came after an Opposition Assemblyman raised the matter during the State Budget debate.

Zainal had said the renovation was based on a recommendation by the Public Works Department and was approved by the State Executive Council, and also by the State Financial Officer.

In Kuala Lumpur, Umno Youth leader Datuk Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, when asked to comment on the renovation cost, said if the amount had not been used up, it would be wise not to use the balance.

He said the incident should be a reminder to other government departments that proposing such renovations would have "negative connotations".

"We should comply with the directive by the Prime Minister to cut down on less important expenses," he added.

The issue was hotly debated at the State Assembly in Shah Alam today. Teng Chang Khim (DAP-Bukit Gasing) said the Government should spend every ringgit wisely.

Speaking during the State Budget debate, he said the amount was too high and the explanation given by State Exco members "unsatisfactory".

He said Zainal had said the residence was built in 1974 and was occupied by four Menteris Besar and, therefore, renovation was proposed by the PWD.

Teng said the fact that the residence was 23 years old did not justify spending RM5 million on renovation. "This seems to be more expensive than building a new official residence."

He said the Menteri Besar's office was also renovated, at a cost of

RM1,334,302.

Giving the breakdown, Teng said RM1,004,977 was spent on civil works, RM179,500 on electrical works and RM149,825 on mechanical works.

He said partitioning alone cost RM169,315, imported carpets and tiles (RM60,380), wall finishes (RM68,814), ceiling finishes (RM74,754), furniture fittings and loose furniture (RM130,185), sofa set (RM45,843) and curtains (RM28,750).

"I feel the amount spent on some of the civil works is rather high," he said, adding that the Menteri Besar's office now looked like a club house.

Teng said Malaysians must try to save as much as possible and maintain the eight per cent annual economic growth.

He urged the Auditor-General to study the two projects and ascertain whether the allocation made was reasonable.

He also urged the Anti-Corruption Agency to investigate if any parties had cashed in on this "golden opportunity to make financial gains".

He pointed out that the Menteri Besar and State Secretary's Development Budget for 1997 did not mention the RM5 million allocation made for renovation at the Menteri Besar's official residence.

He said monies were instead allocated for village roads in nine districts (RM6.21 million), bridges and culverts in nine districts (RM2.65 million), drains in nine districts (RM2.20 million), construction of 70 new halls in nine districts (RM3.50 million), multi-purpose halls in eight districts (RM3.30 million), 32 public halls in nine districts (RM5.65 million), 54 low-cost housing projects in nine districts (RM8.42 million) and information technology development (RM2 million).

"I agree with the State Government's decision to reduce asset purchases from RM48.8 million allocated this year to RM32.1 million next year, with a reduction in imported vehicles and machinery," he said.

However, Teng said he did not understand why the Menteri Besar, the Exco members and heads of department could not use Proton Perdanas instead of imported cars such as Mercedes Benz and Volvo.

State Assemblyman Datuk Saidin Thamby (BN-Paya Jaras) said the RM5 million allocation for renovating the Menteri Besar's official residence was reasonable as it was a turnkey project and for Abu Hassan's big family.

Zainal told reporters later he would explain in detail tomorrow the renovation works at the Menteri Besar's official residence and office.

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