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Dr M: ACA free to probe MB (HL)

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PETALING JAYA, Thurs. - Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today the Anti-Corruption Agency has a free hand to investigate the allegations of corruption and property ownership against Selangor Menteri Besar Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib.

"I don't want (my statement) to influence the ACA, it's up to the ACA to investigate," Dr Mahathir told reporters at the Sultan Abdul Aziz Shah International Airport in Subang on arrival from Islamabad after his official visits to Kuwait, Bahrain and Pakistan.

Dr Mahathir was asked to comment on a report in the Brisbane Courier Mail last month that Muhammad had acquired properties in Australia worth millions of ringgit.

Just hours after the Prime Minister made the statement, the Dewan Rakyat was told that four senior ACA officers were already in Australia to investigate the origin of the RM2.4 million found on Muhammad when he was detained at the Brisbane airport last December.

Deputy Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Nazri Abdul Aziz said the officers would also investigate the report published in the Brisbane Courier Mail.

"The ACA has already been questioning Muhammad since he was detained at the Brisbane airport for violating Australian regulations which require a person to declare the amount of money he or she was in possession when leaving the country, if it was more than A\$5,000.

"The ACA will investigate the origin of the RM2.4 million found on Muhammad," he said in reply to questions raised during the debate on the allocations to the Prime Minister's Department as specified in the Supplementary Supply (1996 and 1997) Bill.

Dr Mahathir said the ACA needed to verify the report linking Muhammad with property ownership in Australia.

"If there is such a report, we have to see whether there is basis or not," he said at the Press conference which was also attended by his Deputy Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

Earlier in Islamabad, Dr Mahathir said a Menteri Besar and a number of Government officers were being investigated for corruption.

"Currently one chief minister (Menteri Besar) is being investigated by the agency and a number of other Government officers. They are all under investigation if there is any report of corruption," Bernama quoted him as saying.

On March 30, DAP secretary general Lim Kit Siang said the Brisbane Courier Mail had reported that Muhammad and his wife, Puan Sri Asbi Rohani Asnan, were building a RM1 million house on a piece of land valued at another RM1 million in the Sovereign Islands.

Lim said the paper in its March 29 report, stated that about three months ago, Muhammad and his wife had bought 4,500ha of cattle, sheep and grain property in Currajong Park in Western Queensland for RM5 million.

He said they were also interested in buying more properties worth RM12 million in Australia.

Lim called on Muhammad to explain about his properties, saying that the public had the right to know.

To-date, Muhammad had not denied the report nor sought legal recourse from the publisher of the newspaper which said he was Umno vice-president and political adviser to Dr Mahathir.

Asked why Muhammad did not deny the newspaper report, Dr Mahathir said:  
"I know nothing of this matter, wait for the ACA (investigations)."

On Monday, Anwar told the Dewan Rakyat that Muhammad was under investigation for failing to declare RM2.4 million in cash in Australia as well as other cases.

Anwar said the ACA would also investigate a report relating to property ownership by Muhammad in Australia.

Dr Mahathir when asked to comment on today's news reports that eight State Executive Councillors from six States were being investigated for alleged involvement in corrupt practices, said the ACA had to determine whether there was any truth in the allegations.

"This is normal. If there is suspicion that they are involved in corruption, the ACA must do its job to find out whether there is basis or not," he said.

The eight State Exco members comprise one each from Johor, Pahang, Kedah, Sabah and Selangor and three from Malacca.

Asked whether the power of prosecution for corruption cases should be reverted to the ACA Director-General instead of the Attorney-General as it was previously, the Prime Minister said that it was better if the AG studied such cases.

"I do not know the finer points but usually if there is a case, it must be submitted to the AG, or else it may be wrong in law. So, it is better for the AG to study the case to find out whether it is correct in law," he said.

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