

13/04/1997

Selangor MB resigns (HL)

Ramlan Said; Tengku Sariffuddin

KUALA LUMPUR, Sat. - Selangor Menteri Besar Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib, who faces two charges in Australia relating to his failure to declare cash amounting to A\$1.2 million (RM2.4 million) at Brisbane airport on Dec 22, has resigned.

Announcing this, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said Muhammad resigned of his own accord after listening to the views of Umno supreme council members at a three-hour meeting today.

Dr Mahathir told the Press after the meeting that Muhammad's resignation took effect on Monday.

Muhammad, 51, is also stepping down as Selangor and Federal Territory Umno liaison chief and Selangor and Federal Territory Barisan Nasional chairman.

Dr Mahathir, who is Umno president, said: "Muhammad made the decision on his own after hearing views from council members."

He said Muhammad, who is serving his second consecutive term as Umno vice-president, would make an official statement on Monday on his resignation.

Responding to a question, Prime Minister said the council accepted his wish to resign. The council discussed at length the controversy surrounding Muhammad's case.

Muhammad sat three seats away from Dr Mahathir as he fielded questions from reporters, mostly relating to the Menteri Besar's court case and his resignation.

Later, when asked by the Press how he felt, Muhammad, who appeared calm and composed, said: "I am okay."

He declined to say anything more and told reporters to wait for his Press conference on Monday.

Muhammad was charged on Dec 23 with failure to declare cash equivalent to RM2.4 million while leaving Brisbane International Airport on Dec 22 for New Zealand.

It was reported from the Australian city yesterday that he will also be charged with making a false declaration when his case comes up for hearing on Aug 19.

Meanwhile, the Anti-Corruption Agency is investigating a Brisbane Courier Mail report alleging 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 on Sovereign Islands.

The paper, in its March 29 report, also claimed that about three months ago Muhammad and Asbi had bought a 4,500ha piece of agricultural land in Currajong Park in Western Queensland for RM5 million.

Asked whether Muhammad's decision to quit could be regarded as an admission of guilt, Dr Mahathir said: "I don't know whether it is an admission of guilt but it is his stand that he does not want to be linked with Umno ... any investigation is not on Umno but on him."

The Prime Minister was also asked whether Muhammad's decision was appropriate.

"It is up to him to make the decision. He has the right (to make the decision)."

When it was pointed out that Muhammad was charged with failing to declare the money he was carrying and not with corruption, Dr Mahathir said the case had affected the party.

"We are concerned about the party ... we feel he is responsible but it is his right to make a decision. Members should not smear Umno's name by doing something which may cast aspersions on the party."

Dismissing claims that Muhammad resigned under pressure, especially from the Opposition, Dr Mahathir said Muhammad did so on his own accord "to protect Umno's image".

"It is his own wish to resign," the Prime Minister said, "so that any investigation conducted will not affect the party's image."

Dr Mahathir said the Government did not need a push from the Opposition to act against corruption and abuse of power.

As to whether the supreme council had advised Muhammad to resign, the Prime Minister said: "We debated the matter. He made the decision after hearing views from council members."

Replying to a query on whether Muhammad would be reappointed to his posts if he was found not guilty by the Brisbane Magistrate's Court, Dr Mahathir said if one was proven innocent, he should not be punished.

"We will only consider his position in the party after the case in Brisbane on whether he is guilty or not," he added.

On Muhammad's successor, Dr Mahathir said this would be determined after he had discussions on the matter.

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