

06/06/1998

PM: I've to check his declaration (HL)

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PETALING JAYA, Fri. - Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said he needs to check whether former Selangor Menteri Besar Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib has already declared the assets he owns in Australia.

"It is not a question of whether he is going to declare his assets now. It is a question of whether he had that kind of assets when he made his declaration (earlier).

"I want to check whether the assets that appear to be his which he mentioned (in court) in Australia have already been declared," Dr Mahathir said at the Sultan Abdul Aziz Shah Airport in Subang today on his return from a five-day working visit to Japan.

He was met on arrival by Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohamed Ali, Information Minister Datuk Seri Mohamed Rahmat and Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs Minister Datuk Seri Megat Junid Megat Ayob.

While in Tokyo Dr Mahathir met his Japanese counterpart Ryutaro Hashimoto and delivered a keynote address on recovery of the Japanese and East Asian economies at a symposium organised by the Institute of International Monetary Affairs.

Asked whether Muhammad would be required to declare his assets to him as Umno president, Dr Mahathir said:

"One declares his assets to the Prime Minister. The president (of Umno) does not ask for asset declarations. All Ministers, Menteris Besar and Chief Ministers have to declare their assets to me."

Muhammad's assets include a 4,400ha farm in Currajong Park, Queensland worth A\$3.7 million (RM8.8 million), a plot of land worth A\$460,000 and a bungalow worth A\$460,000 on Sovereign Island, a NZ\$500,000 (RM1 million) house and two plots of land valued at NZ\$4 million in New Zealand.

Dr Mahathir was asked to comment on a statement by Umno secretary-general Datuk Sabbaruddin Chik yesterday that the fate of Muhammad as party vice-president would depend on his declaration of assets to the president.

Sabbaruddin said the decision was taken at the Umno management and disciplinary committee meeting chaired by deputy president Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim yesterday.

Dr Mahathir said he did not know what transpired at the meeting, but added:

"There is a requirement for Ministers to declare their assets every two years, especially when there is an increase or change."

Asked whether Muhammad had declared his assets to him after his case in Australia was highlighted, Dr Mahathir said:

"No, I did not get any declaration nor do I remember receiving any asset declaration from him."

Asked when was the last time Muhammad had declared his assets, Dr Mahathir said:

"I cannot remember exactly. I have got many declaration of assets to look at."

Asked whether he would meet Muhammad who had expressed his intention to meet him, Dr Mahathir said: "Well, I can see him. He is still a party member, although he is on leave as vice-president."

Muhammad was last week acquitted on two charges of falsely declaring the money he took into Australia in December 1996 and failing to declare more than A\$1.2 million when he left the country.

District Court Judge Eric Pratt freed Muhammad after the 12-man jury, which deliberated for almost five hours, returned a unanimous verdict of not guilty.

The Anti-Corruption Agency said last week that it was still investigating Muhammad, who resigned as Menteri Besar in April last year.

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