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Rumour mill into overdrive as Daim takes leave

AAT

IT may be necessary for the Government to establish a rumour service centre under the Information Ministry soon. At the rate rumours are being churned out nowadays, such a centre may be needed to dismiss or confirm them as they make their rounds.

The speed at which the rumours travel far exceed the speed of light. In a flash, cellular phones ring ceaselessly and e-mails are forwarded to all addresses.

The modern-day technology-run rumour mill, aided by spin doctors of varied affiliations and inclinations, has never been more busy than in the last few days.

Anything, and anyone, can trigger a rumour. These past few days, the rumour mill speculated on the job specifications of Tan Sri Ali Abul Hassan who, as we now know, has been appointed economic advisor to the Prime Minister.

This led to fresh speculation that he was about to be given a more senior position than that.

The teh tarek talk is that the former Bank Negara Governor, who before that was the Director-General of the Economic Planning Unit, was to be made Finance Minister, replacing Tun Daim Zainuddin who is now on leave.

When it was pointed out that Ali is not an elected representative, which ruled him out of such a senior appointment, the rumour backers were not easily swayed, arguing that Education Minister Tan Sri Musa Ahmad is not an MP and yet he is a key member of the Cabinet.

The rumours gained momentum when it made its way to the Parliament building.

By Wednesday evening, the lobby of the Parliament building was abuzz with speculation that Daim would indeed leave the Cabinet, citing differences with Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad as the push factor.

In fact, the talk went as far as saying that Daim was on long leave, one that is normally associated with pre-departure blues.

Since even honourable Members of Parliament talk about it, some openly and some in very guarded tones, many argued that there must be some truth in it.

Ali Abul Hassan aside, one Cabinet member was also quizzed if he would be the next Finance Minister since Daim was said to be leaving. The Cabinet member could only express surprise at the question.

There seems to be a growing tendency to believe that anyone going on long leave does so as a pre-departure move.

In Daim's case, some spin doctors may be going around suggesting that he and Dr Mahathir have too wide and deep a difference, and that one must go.

That Daim returned to serve Dr Mahathir soon after the 1997 financial and economic crisis was not remembered and perhaps no longer relevant to the rumour sponsors.

Actually, it is no secret among staffers in the Treasury and Putrajaya that Daim is a workaholic, who discharges his duties even when said to be on leave. Like now.

This seems to be the culture with certain other members of the Cabinet. The Prime Minister is a good example.

The record will show that he has submitted his leave forms, but he makes working visits and maintains work-related schedules.

Daim, too, is no different. In the coming weeks that he's on leave,

don't be surprised to see him officiating at functions and chairing discussion groups in his office and elsewhere.

When he does leave, and sooner or later he would, don't be surprised when the rumour millers exclaimed: "See, I told you he'd go!"

For those who have mountains of reports to read and other paper work to go through, doing them under the cover of "annual leave" is not something new and unusual.

This country has enough examples of very senior leaders perpetrating that culture.