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Umno general assembly, Fifa World Cup finals overshadow proceedings

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TWO major events, one taking place thousands of kilometres away, overshadowed the Dewan Rakyat proceedings this week.

With the daily drama and excitement unfolding in the Fifa World Cup finals in South Korea and Japan, the football fans among the MPs could not resist the temptation to set up camp in the lounge on Monday and Tuesday for the live telecast of the afternoon matches between the United States and Mexico, and Japan and Turkey.

Attendance in the House after the lunch break has always been low. The World Cup has certainly made it worse.

The number plummeted on Wednesday and Thursday although it was rest day for the World Cup. The "pulling factor" this time was the Umno general assembly at the Putra World Trade Centre.

With almost the entire Umno MPs at the PWTC, the Opposition had a field day with their MPs monopolising debates.

However, they were not complaining except for Husam Musa (Pas-Kubang Kerian) who felt that Umno should not have held its assembly when Parliament was in session.

"The Parliament dates have been set much earlier. Umno should have taken note of that."

When the Perbadanan Putrajaya (Amendment) Bill 2002 came up for debate, of the four MPs who took part, three were from Pas and Keadilan. The usual speakers from BN were conspicuously absent.

Datuk Hassan Ali (Pas-Parit Buntar) was able to hold the floor for more than an hour and even he seemed not to believe his luck - given the freedom to attack the Government throughout the speech without the usual "harrassment" from backbenchers.

The only interruption came from National Unity and Social Development Ministry Parliamentary Secretary Datuk S. Veerasingam and Deputy Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Douglas Uggah Embas who sought some clarification.

Entrusted with the duty to jaga Parliament were MPs from other component parties in Barisan Nasional, with Batang Lupar MP Wan Junaidi Tuanku Jaafar playing the unofficial leading role.

He slammed Hassan and the others for having nothing constructive to say about the new federal administrative centre of Putrajaya.

Wan Junaidi felt it was not wrong to criticise but it should be done in a constructive manner. This, he demonstrated, when he called on Putrajaya Corporation to erect more signs in the area as the present ones were insufficient and intended more for those familiar with the area.

"Assistance" for Wan Junaidi and the other backbenchers holding fort came from Umno MPs who managed to juggle their time between PWTC and Parliament.

Spotting them in the House was easy: they were in Baju Melayu, the attire of most delegates to the assembly. (Umno MPs seldom wear the Baju Melayu to Parliament except on Budget Day which is always a Friday).

Their presence was also due to the Speaker Tun Mohd Zahir Ismail setting aside one hour on Wednesday to debate a motion moved by Mahfuz Omar (Pas-Pokok Sena) on the 10 per cent quota for non-Bumiputeras in Mara Junior Science Colleges and matriculation courses.

The Government's decision to teach Mathematics and Science in English from next year was also hotly debated.

The colourful Education Ministry Parliamentary Secretary Datuk Mahadzir Mohd Khir responded to sceptics to the move by likening it to the popular TV series and movie Mission Impossible.

He brought smiles when he explained: "The title is Mission Impossible but all missions entrusted to characters in the movie were carried out successfully, with the aid of modern gadgets, equipment and ingenuity.

"It is the same with teaching both subjects in English, which seems an impossible mission to achieve. But in this digital world and modern technology, the ministry is confident it can be done."

The mid-year sitting started on a high note with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad fielding questions from MPs during the one-hour question-and-answer session on Monday.

He had earlier chaired a pre-council meeting for BN MPs and senators.

In the lobby, the spotlight was on DAP-Batu Gajah MP Fong Po Kuan who returned after serving a six-month suspension without pay.

Clutching a bouquet of flowers given by supporters, she obliged requests for photographs and quotes from journalists and cameramen.

Her colleague, Kerk Kim Hock (DAP-Kota Melaka), who is undergoing treatment for cancer of the rectum, was also the centre of attraction, with everyone wishing him a speedy and complete recovery.

The absence of Opposition leader, Datuk Fadzil Noor, was also noted.

The House resumes sitting on Monday.

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