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Rafidah: Aussies treated me like terrorist during official visit

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KUALA PILAH, Fri. - International Trade and Industry Minister Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz today lambasted Australian officials for "treating her like a terrorist" during her visit there for a World Trade Organisation meeting two weeks ago.

She said the officials had given her a hard time, demanding that her hand-luggage be checked by police sniffer dogs three times at different locations.

"When I was going through security checks, they told me to put my hand luggage before the sniffer dogs. I told them that I would not allow that as I am Muslim.

"How could they do such a thing, particularly during the fasting month and when the animal is haram to Muslims? They were so insensitive," she said, adding that she had nothing to fear as she was not carrying dadah, explosives or anything else that could be detrimental to Australia's interests.

She told the officials that they could open her bag if they suspected anything, but she would not allow a dog anywhere near it.

Rafidah was in Australia to attend the World Trade Organisation meeting on Nov 14-15. She was among 27 of the world's 142 Trade Ministers invited.

She told reporters this after giving away Hari Raya gifts to 50 families at the multi-purpose hall here today.

She had pointed out that she was a guest of the Australian Government and not there for a holiday.

"You should know that I was invited as a guest of the Australian Government," she said.

The officials relented and allowed her to leave the VIP room.

Before she could enter her car, however, security officials again told her that she would have to have her luggage inspected.

"Again I told them that I did not want to see any dog near my luggage but they could open it for inspection," she said, adding that they then allowed her to board the car.

She was escorted by five outriders for the trip from the airport to the hotel.

Rafidah said upon reaching the hotel, security officials with sniffer dogs for the third time told her to surrender her bag so that they could screen it.

"This time, I blew my top. I told them if they were to touch my bag, I would take the next flight home," she said. Again, the officials relented.

Rafidah said even when she was in her room, an Australian official asked whether her bag was with her all the time.

Describing these events as "ridiculous", Rafidah, who was escorted from the airport right to her room, said it was evident that she could not have spoken or been in contact with anyone else.

She said what was more painful was that the only other ministers required to submit their luggage to sniffer-dog checks were from Mexico and Lesotho.

"The rest, including our Indonesian counterpart, were not," she said.

Rafidah said she also felt something amiss when her security tag stated that it was approved by the Australian Embassy in the United States, while most of her counterparts bore tags approved by the Department of Foreign Trade in Canberra.

"Can you believe it? They told me the reason for this was because they did not have enough tags for all of us...the 27 ministers who were attending the meeting," she said.

She was also irked by an Australian newspaper report accusing her of "throwing her weight around" simply because she had protested against the use of sniffer dogs to check her bags.

Rafidah said she had not encountered such problems in New York prior to her trip to Australia.

"I told the Australian officials that I was not accorded such treatment in New York."

She said Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad was correct when he said Australia was not safe.

"We were told not to leave our rooms at all. But if they were to come here, we would surely show them around and take them to places like Langkawi," she said.

Rafidah said she had reported the matter to the Cabinet and the former Australian High Commissioner to Malaysia, Peter Varghese.

"What he told me was that all ministers had to go through similar procedures (having sniffer dogs check their luggage).

"But when I told him that they did not, he told me that probably they did not realise it," she said.

Asked whether she would visit Australia again, Rafidah said she did not know.

"What I think is that we should not be hassled," she added.