

19/07/2005

RAFIDAH-AP

GOVT RELEASED AP LIST TO STOP SPECULATION, SAYS RAFIDAH

KUALA LUMPUR, July 19 (Bernama) -- The government decided to release of the names of those who received Approved Permits to stop speculation that these permits were being abused, the Minister of International Trade and Industry (MITI), Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz, said today.

The Wanita UMNO chief also cleared the air by declaring that she was not related to Tan Sri Nasimuddin SM Amin Nasimuddin, the managing director of the Naza Motor Group Naza, who is among the major recipients of the APs via several companies.

There had been speculation previously that both of them were related through marriage of their family members.

The other major AP recipients were Datuk Seri Syed Azman Syed Ibrahim and Datuk Mohd Haniff Abd Aziz, both former MITI officers, who received the APs jointly and through several other companies.

"I have no connection with any of the AP holders, (either) in terms of being related or in any other aspect," said an emotional Rafidah when asked on the controversy surrounding the issuance of APs and the release of the list yesterday at a media briefing after chairing Wanita Umno's exco meeting here.

The controversy erupted when former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad said the issuance of a large number of these permits had led to unfair competition against the national car, Proton. Dr Mahathir is also Proton adviser.

Dr Mahathir had said recently that many importers were under-declaring prices and selling cars at a price that was lower than the actual price.

He had also questioned how 20 companies were given the bulk of more than 50,000 APs when the government's aim was to assist as many bumiputera businessmen as possible by spreading out the issuance of such permits.

Following this, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi asked Rafidah to reply all the points raised by Dr Mahathir, which the minister did before she went on leave abroad.

At today's briefing, Rafidah also read out portions of the letter to the media.

At one juncture, the normally fiesty minister broke into tears while reading the final portion of the letter she had written to Dr Mahathir, which centred on a birthday greeting to the former prime minister and wishing his wife, Tun Dr Siti Hasmah, well.

Asked why she cried, the tearful Rafidah said she was saddened by allegations that she was being disrespectful to Dr Mahathir, which she said was not true at all as they had been working together for so long.

"And I was the first who prevented him from resigning," she said when recalling the occasion when Dr Mahathir announced his intention to resign as prime minister at the 2002 UMNO General Assembly here.

Providing a background to the chain of events surrounding the AP controversy, Rafidah said Abdullah had informed her of the need to release the names to put a stop to the speculation.

"The PM telephoned me when I was on holiday, saying that there was too much speculation on this. He felt that it was appropriate to publish the list as there was nothing to hide," said the teary Rafidah who was overcome with emotions.

The minister, who went on leave more than a week ago, returned to work yesterday.

Rafidah said her ministry came out with the list of AP holders and submitted it to the Prime Minister's Office which released it to the media yesterday.

Asked why a few people got a larger share of the APs, Rafidah replied, "It is not true that there is a monopoly of people holding the permits as the recipients hold franchises of different brands and they work hard to get their franchises."

As for two former officials of her ministry, Syed Azman and Mohd Haniff, who were among the few with the lion's share of the APs, Rafidah said, "Who they are should not matter."

"Why penalise the government people, it's not fair. They have retired but they work hard to get the franchise and managed to convince the foreigners (principal companies)," she said.

On the contrary, she stressed that the accomplishments of these people should "boost the bumiputera name and the Malays should be proud of them."

Nasimuddin, in a separate statement, said his Naza Group had earned the trust and confidence of Kia Motors of South Korea to progress from a relationship based on distributorship to becoming the latter's technical partner eventually. Through Naza Kia Sdn Bhd, the group has 96 sales outlets selling the Naza Ria and Naza Citra and 70 service and parts outlets nationwide.

To claims the issuance of APs had hurt Proton sales, Rafidah said analyses by her ministry showed that in 2004, imports of cars with capacity of 1.8 litre and below, stood at 17,455 units which accounted for only 3.2 percent of the total production for the year at 530,035 units.

At such a percentage, car imports were "hardly anything" as they were from different brands, she said.

Yesterday, Rafidah said the number of APs approved yearly were limited to 10 percent of the total number of cars produced locally plus another 10 percent to fulfill the growth of the liberalised market.

A ceiling or limit was put in place to ensure that the interest of the national cars were not compromised, she explained.

Despite this limit, she said the number of cars imported during any of the years had been lower than 10 percent of the total car production in Malaysia.

To ensure that imports did not affect sales of Proton, she said MITI had been monitoring the price differential between national and imported cars so that this would be at a range of between RM6,000 and RM18,000.

On whether APs would be revoked if AP holders were found to have under-declared the value of imported cars, she said rather than revoking, the Royal Customs Department should impose (the appropriate) penalties. --

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