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Ong tells why he didn't show up at PPP general assembly

KUALA LUMPUR, Mon. - MCA president Datuk Seri Ong Ka Ting attributed last-minute changes in the date for the People's Progressive Party annual general assembly for his absence at the opening of its meeting yesterday.

However, Ong clarified that his absence was not meant to offend PPP or its president Datuk M. Kayveas, who had criticised Ong for not showing up.

"If the opening of the assembly was held on Oct 28 as originally scheduled, I would have been able to attend. But yesterday, I had prior engagements which made it very difficult to cancel or re-schedule," Ong said.

The date change was to accommodate Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's schedule. Dr Mahathir, who is also BN chairman and set to retire on Friday, officiated at the assembly.

Ong said under normal circumstances, if the MCA president could not attend the general assembly opening of a Barisan Nasional component party, the party would send a representative who is at least a minister.

However, he added that deputy president Datuk Chan Kong Choy, who is also Transport Minister, was in Pahang yesterday receiving an award from the Sultan of Pahang and could not represent him (Ong).

Datuk Dr Fong Chan Onn was overseas while Datuk Chua Jui Meng had prior commitments. Both are MCA vice-presidents and ministers.

Ong was in Genting Highlands yesterday to close the 11th Malaysia Lion Dance Championship 2003 and also had several meetings.

"I did not mean to upset Kayveas by not showing up. My commitments were planned long ago," said Ong, who is also Housing and Local Government Minister.

MCA was represented at the the PPP general assembly by its Federal Territory chairman Datuk Tan Chai Ho, who is also Energy, Communications and Multimedia Deputy Minister.

Asked to comment on Kayveas' claims that he and Ong did not enjoy good ties when the former was his deputy in the Housing and Local Government Ministry, Ong said:

"In the spirit of BN, both of us as presidents of BN component parties, should enhance our relationship for the sake of the coalition.

"Whatever is in the past should remain in the past. I look forward to better ties with Kayveas and the PPP."

On whether he would be meeting Kayveas to iron out their differences, Ong said there were many opportunities to enhance their relations.

Yesterday, Kayveas, who is Deputy Minister in the Prime Minister's Department, disclosed that during his 18-month stint under Ong, both of them hardly spoke.

Last month, Kayveas had accused Penang MCA of being "arrogant" for allegedly boycotting several PPP-organised functions in the State.

Penang MCA chairman Wong Kam Hoong had denied the allegations and said Kayveas should not turn MCA into his (Kayveas') "whipping boy" in the State.