

02/10/2003

Probe into MPs' claims begins (HL)

Marina Emmanuel; V. Anbalagan; June Ramli

KUALA LUMPUR, Wed. - Anti-Corruption Agency officials have taken copies of claims submitted by 14 Members of Parliament whose monthly mileage claims exceeded RM10,000.

Dewan Rakyat secretary Datuk Mohd Salleh Hassan said today that two senior officers from Putrajaya called on him yesterday to determine how claims were made.

"I explained the procedure to them and what MPs are entitled to," he said when met at his office today.

He said another officer came to see him this morning to obtain copies of claims submitted by the MPs.

"I instructed my officers to provide whatever assistance that was required," he said. It is learnt that the officer also interviewed senior accountant Sarifah Hassan on the claims.

In Langkawi, Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Seri Dr Rais Yatim said all "large and unexpected" mileage claims submitted by MPs should be investigated.

This, he said, was to ensure that such claims were justified as public funds were involved.

Rais said his mileage claims had not exceeded RM5,000 on each occasion from the time he had become an MP, noting that many ministers did not also exceed this figure. Therefore, he said, reports that several MPs had submitted monthly mileage claims exceeding RM10,000 were out of the ordinary.

"High claims like these must be investigated to ensure the expenses are justified," he said after attending the weekly Cabinet meeting chaired by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad at Gunung Raya.

Rais had been asked to comment on reports that the ACA would interview the 14 MPs whose monthly mileage claims had exceeded RM10,000.

Asked if there was a limit to claims by MPs, Rais said that an MP's monthly claim could be between RM3,000 and RM4,200.

The MPs whose claims exceeded RM10,000 a month are Mohd Apanidi Mohamad (Pas-Jeli - on 10 instances), Lubuk Antu Jawah Gerang (BN-Lubok Antu - four), Abdul Rahman Yusof (Keadilan-Kemaman - twice), and Abdul Fatah Harun (Pas-Rantau Panjang), Lau Hoi Chew (BN-Sibu), Women and Family Development Ministry Parliamentary Secretary and Arau MP Datuk Mastika Junaidah Husin, Kong Cho Har (BN-Lumut), Hoo Seong Chang (BN-Kluang), Lim Bee Kau (BN-Padang Serai), Goh Kheng Huat (DAP-Nibong Tebal), Mohd Yusoff Mohd Nor (Pas-Machang), Ramli Ibrahim (Keadilan-Kota Baru), Abu Bakar Othman (Pas-Jerlun) and Mohd Nasir Che Daud (Pas-Kuala Krai) - all once.

Asked whether more "exorbitant" claims from other MPs had been discovered, Rais said he was currently unaware as he did not have the Parliament accounts with him.

"However, the Government would like to determine the number of individuals and their associates involved, and we will continue monitoring this case since public funds should not be abused," he added.

Asked if it was an offence for MPs to submit excessive mileage claims, Rais said: "It is not an offence, although such claims must be verified. We need to determine under which allocation the claims are being made."

Meanwhile, Dewan Rakyat Speaker Tun Mohamed Zahir Ismail said the ACA was the appropriate body to investigate the MPs.

"These MPs made claims when the House was not in session. We do not know

the nature of their claims and, therefore, the ACA is the right body to probe into this matter," he said when the House adjourned for lunch.

He said the law should take its natural course in the matter.

He said the committee could only look into matters that occurred in the House like cases of indiscipline.

"The Federal Constitution is clear that convicted MPs can be disqualified as elected representatives if they are fined more than RM2,000 or jailed more than a year or both after all avenues of appeal are exhausted," he said.

Under the present scheme, MPs are entitled to a meeting allowance (attending Dewan Rakyat) of RM150 a day, RM100 for subsistence, up to RM200 for their stay in hotel or RM80 for lodging (no need to provide receipt) and mileage claim of 60 sen per km. Alternatively, they could also claim air fare.

Mohamed Zahir said this in response to Kerk Kim Hock's (DAP-Kota Melaka) call earlier today when speaking to reporters in the lobby that the Privileges Committee, and not the ACA, look into the matter.

Kerk, who is also DAP secretary-general, claimed the committee chaired by Mohamed Zahir had the authority to deliberate on the matter.

The committee made up of MPs from the Barisan Nasional and Opposition could investigate their fellow elected representatives, he said, adding that it was premature for the ACA to start its probe.

He said it would also look awkward for MPs elected to the highest legislative body in the country to be queried by a government agency.

Parliamentary Secretary in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Noh Omar said the MPs should not fear ACA investigations if they could account for what they had submitted.

Under Statute Paper 235/8, MPs are entitled to unlimited claims by producing receipts and invitation cards for official functions attended.

Backbencher Club chairman Datuk Mohd Zin Mohamed said the body would extend its co-operation to the ACA. "There are some who claimed more than RM15,000 a month. It looks that the MPs concerned did not stay at home at all," he said.

Mohd Apandi said he had been directed by his lawyer to refrain from talking to the Press.

"The ACA has not interviewed me. For your information, there is a programme almost every day in my constituency," he said.

Lau said he had been in Parliament over the last 14 years but had only once made a claim that exceeded RM10,000.

Hoo said he would leave the matter to the ACA.

However, Abdul Rahman said his claims had only twice exceeded RM10,000 a month as his constituency was very large.

"Kemaman is a big rural constituency. My claims range from RM8,000 to RM10,000 a month. It is (quite) a distance from one location to another," he said.