

PM's Oz visit - personal or official?
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Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak is back after cutting short his Australian trip, but questions remain over the status and funding of his visit.

Komtar state assemblyperson Ng Wei Aik noted that the premier had met with Malaysian students in Perth but that he had also travelled on a personal matter. For this reason, Najib should foot the travel bill.

"(Najib's trip was) something beyond the meeting with the students there. He should go on a private flight and spend his own money. Once you use government planes, then the government has to pay for you ...," he said

Ng pointed out that Penang Chief Minister Lim Guan Eng opts for economy-class travel on flights, even on official business.

"For official trips, the amount used for travel must be approved (by) the exco. (Individuals) cannot spend more than the amount approved and Lim always takes (what costs least)," he said.

There are special allocations for state excos for holidays, he said, but this does not cover travel by plane.

"The chief minister and all exco members get a RM15,000 holiday benefit a year but there is nothing more, no exclusive jets," said Ng, who is political secretary to Lim.

Najib's presence in Australia had gone unnoticed until a Malaysiakini reader said the prime minister's plane had been sighted landing in Perth on Aug 31.

News about Najib's presence in Australia was only officially broken on Sept 3, after Bernama reported that the premier was cutting short his holiday following the death the national news agency's cameraman in Somalia.

The Prime Minister's Office then clarified that the Hari Raya and National Day public holidays were the only time Najib was free to seek physiotherapy treatment in Australia.

Official observance of National Day has been moved to Sept 16 as it clashed with the Hari Raya festivities this year.

The opposition has previously accused the government of using official business as an excuse for costly overseas trips, a claim that the government has denied.

However, in a parliamentary written reply to Batu MP Tian Chua in June, it was revealed that for 2010, Najib and his wife's official travel expenditure had ballooned to RM5.4 million, compared to RM1.74 million in 2008 when Abdullah Ahmad Badawi was in office.