

Gov't defends Najib's private holiday in Milan
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Pressed by an opposition MP, the Prime Minister's Department has conceded that Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak went for a private holiday in Milan on an official aircraft, but argued that only a minimal number of officials travelled with him to ensure his security.

The whole private visit from May 18 to 25 - a two-day trip in Washington followed by a five-day trip to Milan and transit in Dubai - has taken up RM273,799.57 of taxpayers' money, Deputy Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Liew Vui Keong told Parliament last night.

The entourage with "minimal number of officials" included police escorts, private officers, a doctor and security officers, and all their expenses were borne by the government as they were on official duty, said Liew.

"Although the prime minister was on holiday, his duty and responsibility as the prime minister of Malaysia was not terminated.

"Hence it is inappropriate if there are quarters that think the security issue of the prime minister should be put aside simply because he was on holiday.

NONE"Based on security policy and national interest, the government's approval for the prime minister to use government executive aircraft during his private visit raised by Yang Berhormat (Teresa Kok) (right) should not have arisen," he replied.

Liew was responding to a follow-up question raised by Kok (Seputeh - DAP) who was not satisfied with the previous reply given by Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Mohd Nazri Abdul Aziz on spending during Najib's overseas trips.

In the previous reply, Nazri only revealed that Najib with his officers went off to Washington on a six-day "private visit" from May 19 to 24 which cost RM452,985.75, without mentioning that there was a Milan visit that took up most part of the trip.

Last night Liew clarified that the RM452,985.75 figure given by Nazri was just an estimation based on Najib's initial plan to visit only Washington.

"However the prime minister had decided to make a private visit to Milan from May 20 to 24. This change had caused the issue of coordinating the report about the visit at the administrative and financial level, and it was not included in the reply to the previous question."

'Figure taken from initial estimation'

At the time of answering Kok's previous question, Liew said the officials of the entourage as well as the Malaysia embassy in Washington had not made their claims, hence the figure was taken from the initial estimation.

The total estimation of RM452,985.75 covered the air tickets, food allowances, hotel payments, vehicle rentals, telecommunication facilities, laundry, tips, loss from currency exchange and welcoming events, he said.

But the exact total expenses were only RM273,799.57, Liew clarified.

Liew stressed that Najib deserved the holiday as he has been "working regardless of time" to "implement various transformations to increase growth and bring Malaysia to become a high-income nation in 2020".

Although it was a private holiday, Najib had met with top officials of the US State Department, senior politicians of the republic as well as potential investors, he claimed.

On the trip to Dubai before returning to Kuala Lumpur, Liew explained that it was a transit for refuelling.

Kok also questioned whether Najib's visits to London from May 13 to 15 which cost RM849,175.33 and another visit to New York from May 16 to 18 that cost RM1,606,402.75 were a waste of taxpayers' money.

Liew defended both trips, explaining that the reception in Oxford was hosted by Prince Charles in conjunction with the award of a royal charter to the Oxford Centre of Islamic Studies (OCIS) by the Queen of the United Kingdom.

"The invitation was a recognition of the prime minister who is a supreme council member of OCIS, and Malaysia has been actively contributing to the development and advancement of the centre."

As for the New York visit, Najib had chaired the second meeting of the Global Science and Innovation Advisory Council (GSAIC) which witnessed the signing of five memorandums of understanding that could bring smart partnerships and investment to Malaysia, he said.

Najib also met with foreign investors and received courtesy calls from corporate leaders during his trip, Liew added.

"Therefore the issue of wastage does not arise for the prime minister's official visits to the nations mentioned."

Liew later told media through a phone call that Najib's personal expenses during the visits, including shopping, were not borne by the government.