

Najib breaks silence, says TH to make 'millions'

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Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak today finally broke his silence on the controversial land deal between Lembaga Tabung Haji (TH) and debt-ridden 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB), making him the last top Umno leader to do so after the controversy surfaced mid last week.

Najib told a press conference in Sabah that he did not want the controversy to be prolonged and insisted it was not a bailout of 1MDB.

"We do not want to continue with this controversy because it will take away a lot of our energy in terms of concentrating on some of the big programmes that we have in mind," he told reporters after launching the Kota Belud People's Housing Project (PPR).

He claimed the pilgrimage fund would be making several millions overnight by selling the land to the private sector.

"So, it cannot be a bailout (for 1MDB). No private company will buy over a project if the company is going to lose money," Bernama quoted him saying.

Up until yesterday, Deputy Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin, who is Umno deputy president, as well as all three Umno vice presidents, namely Shafie Apdal, Hishammuddin Hussein and Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, have expressed concern.

As the issue boiled over the weekend, all three Umno vice presidents did not have public appearances but issued statements via social media.

In contrast, Najib, who is also Umno president, had ample opportunities to address the issue yesterday as he made at least three public appearances but did not do so.

Notable prolonged silence

After flagging off a marathon in Putrajaya at 7am yesterday, Najib officiated a conference for speakers from Parliament and state assemblies at 10.15am in Kuala Lumpur, before addressing a roundtable on the cost of living at UKM, Bangi at noon.

Instead, the talking was left to Tabung Haji chairperson Abdul Azeez Abdul Rahim, who convened a hastily put-together press conference to announce the land it purchased from 1MDB would be immediately resold to give the public peace of mind.

Abdul Azeez (photo) had revealed that this was done on the advice of Najib.

On Wednesday, rumours emerged online of Tabung Haji purchasing 1MDB's land in a bid to help the cash-strapped 1MDB which has accumulated a staggering debt of RM42 billion.

It was later confirmed that Tabung Haji had paid RM188.5 million for 1.56 acres of the 70-acre Tun Razak Exchange land owned by 1MDB.

1MDB had purchased the entire 70 acres from the government for a mere RM194.1 million.

TH is a fund contributed by largely village folks for their future pilgrimage to Mecca and is considered a sensitive issue in the Malay heartland which makes up Umno's core support base.

1MDB, which has been plagued by negative publicity over its questionable business dealings, is an entity wholly owned by the Finance Ministry, a portfolio held by Najib.

Najib is also chairperson of 1MDB's board of advisors.

Under fire from deputy

Muhyiddin had weighed into the matter even though he was on a working trip in Milan, Italy, saying that he was at a loss to explain the 1MDB issue, and even singled out his boss.

"The rakyat wants to know why no one has been charged, why the 1MDB board has not been sacked, and about the position of the CEO and the prime minister as adviser," he had said on late Friday.

Muhyiddin's (photo) statement came around the same time as Shafie who warned the TH issue will affect the government's credibility.

The next day, Hishammuddin, who is Najib's cousin, also weighed in, stating that the public cannot keep waiting for the auditor-general's investigation into the financial status of 1MDB and called for an independent auditor to be appointed.

This was shortly followed by a statement from Zahid who did not specifically mention TH but warned of a "cancer" spreading in Umno.

"I don't need to make public statements but instead find ways to restore trust in the government and party, where credibility is being eroded due to problems that must be resolved, before the cancer spreads to the rest of the body," he said.

Najib to meet Umno tomorrow

Tomorrow, Najib is also scheduled to meet all Umno division leaders in conjunction with Umno's 69th anniversary.

The premier has over the months held repeated meetings with Umno division leaders in a bid to shore up support amid relentless attacks against him over 1MDB, including from former prime minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Meanwhile, DAP supremo Lim Kit Siang (photo) said Najib cannot continue with his policy of "elegant silence".

"Najib should break his public silence on the RM42 billion 1MDB scandal and explain his role in the 1MDB-TH bailout fiasco, in particular whether he had approved or directed TH in the land deal with 1MDB," said Lim, who is also Gelang Patah MP.

Lim said if Najib had not approved the TH land deal with 1MDB, then he should reveal who is the minister responsible for instructing TH to do so.

"As chairperson of the 1MDB Advisory board, will Najib recommend to the 1MDB to terminate the land transaction with TH and to refund the payments made by TH as 1MDB has not fulfilled all conditions of the sale?" he said.

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