

MPs want Rafidah to personally address AP issue

ANALYSIS BY JOCELINE TAN

YESTERDAY was probably not the best of days to be facing the backbenchers in Parliament.

A number of them were somewhat unsettled by the publication of the list of MPs who had used their approved permit (AP) allocation.

The list of more than 300 MPs and senators from both sides of the fence has added a new dimension to the AP controversy.

Some of the recipients seemed a little bashful even as they insisted that it was part of their benefits or perks as legislators.

Others came across a trifle defensive whereas a few were rather irritated about the list going public.

That was the mood in Parliament when International Trade and Industry Deputy Minister Datuk Ahmad Husni Hanadzlah stood up to answer queries on the AP issue.

But Husni was his usual cool and collected self.

The Tambun MP has been noted for his serious-mindedness even during his backbencher days and his reply to the 15 questions or so on the issue was done in his usual methodical style (*see Parliament reports-Page 12*),

First, he tackled the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (Miti) procedure for issuing APs, then the utilisation of APs by the holders and finally the impact on national carmaker Proton.

Most of MPs were fairly satisfied with Husni's reply but it was the Miti minister they wanted to see.

They felt that the issue was critical and urgent enough to warrant Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz appearing in person to answer to Parliament.

"It's not just me. All the other MPs think she has to be responsible to Parliament," said Bera MP Datuk Ismail Sabri.

A day before Husni's appearance, Miti parliamentary secretary Datuk Dr Tan Yee Kew had answered on the minister's behalf and that had also riled MPs, particularly opposition leader Lim Kit Siang.

"The issue is of great public interest and we're not happy with the way Rafidah has handled it. She should face us," said Ketereh MP Alwi Che Ahmad.

At the very least, said Alwi, Rafidah should have held a dialogue with the government backbenchers before the start of the sittings.

"It's not only the AP issue. Rafidah has also become an issue," said Batu

Pahat MP Dr Junaidy Abdul Wahab.

The fact that Rafidah is overseas on ministry business did not cut any ice with them. They felt that she should have rescheduled her overseas trip.

Rafidah left for the United States early last week and is said to be in Laos now. She is expected home by this weekend.

The AP controversy has shown little sign of abating after two months of intense public interest and media reporting.

The government backbenchers are well prepared to debate the issue because Barisan Nasional backbenchers chief Datuk Shahrir Samad had led a team of MPs to interview people associated with the automotive industry prior to this meeting.

Many MPs expected the issue to be a subject of heated debate but they were surprised that the temperature had shot up this early in the meeting.

Some also thought that Miti's release of the list was meant as a slap in their faces, a sort of reminder that they have also benefited from the system and should think twice before pointing fingers at Miti.

But to be fair to Miti, the list was not meant for publication. Apparently, it was additional information attached to the minister's reply in the event of additional questions from the floor.

This meeting will go on till December and Rafidah will have little excuse not to turn up in Parliament.

But will she show up?

"Even the Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister come to answer key issues. She should not be arrogant. She should show more respect for Parliament," said Ismail.

Some think she will defy the MPs' demands.

Others think she will probably make an appearance and that she is not afraid of facing either the government or opposition MPs.

They said that a woman who has failed to be cowed by a hostile Umno assembly or insistent Cabinet colleagues is unlikely to be rattled by fellow legislators.

"We hope she will come and clear the air otherwise questions will continue to be raised. That is how third degree issues snowball into first degree controversies," said Health Ministry parliamentary secretary and Jelutong MP Lee Kah Choon.