

'Rice import monopoly issue should not be politicised'

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PUTRAJAYA: Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim said the issue of the purported rice imports monopoly by corporate figure Tan Sri Syed Mokhtar Al-Bukhary should not be politicised, as it was raised with the aim of helping poor padi farmers.

Anwar said he had a good discussion on the matter with Syed Mokhtar, who agreed to give back RM10 million this month and RM50 million next year to the farmers.

"We will hold another discussion with the Finance Ministry on how Padiberas Nasional Bhd (Bernas) can assure comfort and justice to poor padi farmers," he told a media conference after starting his official duties as finance minister.

Anwar made these remarks when asked about Kedah Menteri

➤ Discussion to be held with Finance Ministry on ways for Bernas to assure well-being and justice to poor padi farmers, says PM

Besar Datuk Seri Muhammad Sanusi Md Nor's statement that Anwar only dared to reprimand Syed Mokhtar compared with other rich corporate figures in the country because he is a Malay and can be easily bullied.

The prime minister said it was not an easy decision to make just like the decision he made to reduce the frequency of lottery special draws from 22 times to only eight times a year, which had caused certain quarters to label him as anti-Chinese since it involved

Chinese companies.

Anwar said when there were businesses affecting the interests of the poor, including padi farmers in Kedah, he had to take action as the prime minister and finance minister.

"I don't make decisions without discussions. I know him (Syed Mokhtar). I know his company is big and I don't mean to destroy his empire.

"I told him that this is for the better future of poor padi farmers. I don't understand why this is a

problem. The Bernas issue has been going on for years and, for the first time, this is me saying enough is enough."

He added that further discussions are expected to bring more benefits to the farmers, Bernama reported.

Anwar had previously criticised the then government for its decision to extend Bernas' concession period, which gave it the power to monopolise rice imports.

He said yesterday that the government would look into the issue as well as the profits and turnover of Bernas, which is owned by Syed Mokhtar after he bought 31% of the company's shares from Tan Sri Tan Boon Seng for about RM800 million and Datuk Seri Shahidan Kassim's stakes at RM400 million.