

Shahrizat's leave a Putrajaya attempt at damage control
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KUALA LUMPUR, Jan 13 — Datuk Seri Shahrizat Abdul Jalil's three-week leave from ministerial duties from today is being seen as Putrajaya's plan for damage control for the Wanita Umno chief and her party following allegations of financial improprieties in her family-run cattle-farming project funded by the government, say sources.

The Malaysian Insider understands that the Najib administration felt this was the best move in the current situation although some in the Umno rank-and-file including members of Shahrizat's family felt her break from work is an admission of guilt in the scandal-hit National Feedlot Centre (NFC) project.

It is also learnt that there could be possible punitive action taken against Shahrizat's husband and children after the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) and police complete their probe into the NFC, which received a government soft loan of RM250 million in 2008. The Auditor-General's Report 2011 had described the project as a mess.

"Going on leave is the best thing for Shahrizat (picture) and for Umno apart from giving a breather to the Najib administration," a government source told The Malaysian Insider.

He said senior government ministers had discussed the issue with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak before it was suggested to Shahrizat that she should take a short break.

"She initially refused but finally saw wisdom in taking leave," he added.

The women, family and community development minister said in a statement yesterday that she has asked Najib to give her three weeks' leave starting today.

"I hope the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) will be able to investigate whether or not I was involved in any of the decisions made by the government on the NFC in which my husband, Datuk Seri Dr Mohamad Salleh Ismail, is the executive chairman," she said.

The Wanita Umno chief refused to comment earlier yesterday when asked by reporters about PKR's latest allegation involving the national cattle-farming project.

PKR had disclosed an email yesterday detailing how NFC's lawyer allegedly told a MACC advisory board member that an official in the company had been tricked into paying money to a "conman" to influence a police probe into the project.

According to the email, the lawyer told the advisory board member how the NFC official had been tricked into paying money to a "conman" — understood to be Datuk Shamsubahrin Ismail — to allegedly influence ongoing investigations by the police.

Tan Sri Megat Najmuddin Megat Khas confirmed to The Malaysian Insider that he authored the email which PKR presented earlier today as proof that a top NFC official had allegedly

tried to bribe the police.

"He (the lawyer) told us about this conman's story, about how this sweet-talking guy managed to convince his desperate client to part with his money so that he can get the police to be 'less brutal' in their interrogation!

"It's sad to see how stupid one can get when you are stuck 'between a rock and a hard place'!" the email said.

Shamsubahrin was recently charged with cheating Mohamad Salleh of RM1.76 million in fraudulent consultancy fees.

Mohamed Salleh had earlier said Shamsubahrin was neither a relative nor has he ever been an NFC employee.

Police and the MACC are probing the NFC for possible criminal breach of trust following PKR's allegations that at least RM27 million in federal funds meant for the cattle-raising scheme had been used to purchase land and property unrelated to cattle farming.

The opposition party first latched onto the issue after the NFC, which lists all three of Shahrizat's children as directors, made it into last year's Auditor-General's Report for failing to meet production targets.

PKR has since made several revelations relating to the scandal, including NFC's purchase of two luxury condominium units in Bangsar, Kuala Lumpur, and the alleged use of project funds to pay for Shahrizat and her family's personal expenses.

It also claimed there was a transfer of resources to unrelated companies in Singapore, as well as the purchase of a Mercedes-Benz CLS350 for RM534,622 and two plots of land in Putrajaya's Precinct 10 for RM3,363,507.

PKR further alleged that some RM10 million had been diverted towards the purchase of a luxury condominium unit in Singapore for Shahrizat's family.

Shahrizat has denied any wrongdoing and stated she is "only the wife" of the project's chairman.

The senator has faced calls to quit from within Umno including from influential former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

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