

Najib coy on Sabah RCI issue
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By Clara Chooi

KUALA LUMPUR, Feb 24 — Datuk Seri Najib Razak remained coy last night on the status of the royal commission of inquiry (RCI) to look into the problem of illegals in Sabah, only saying ambiguously that the matter is still under consideration.

"Kita sedang timbang (we are considering)," the prime minister replied when asked to confirm claims that his Cabinet had agreed to form the royal panel.

Najib speaks to the press after the Umno supreme council meeting in Kuala Lumpur on February 23, 2012. On the left is Umno deputy president Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin. — Picture by Jack Ooi

Najib did not issue further remarks on the issue and moved on to field other, unrelated questions when speaking to reporters after chairing the Umno supreme council meeting at the Putra World Trade Centre (PWTC) here.

His reply last night throws the highly-publicised issue back into uncertainty and fuels concerns raised last week by Sabah Barisan Nasional (BN) leaders over Putrajaya's sincerity in forming the royal panel.

Earlier this month, federal minister and UPKO president Tan Sri Bernard Dompok announced in the media that the Cabinet had agreed to form the RCI.

State leaders had then expected Najib to formally announce the panel's formation last week during his two-day working visit but the prime minister had left without speaking on the issue.

Rumours then began to arise and Internet news reports screamed of the possibility that Najib had backpedalled on the Cabinet's decision, some even claiming of a "secret meeting" of Umno warlords who warned the prime minister that BN would lose a sizeable chunk of votes if the RCI were to crack down on the state's massive population of illegals.

Opposition party leaders jumped at the opportunity to trumpet to the public their assertion that Sabah-based parties in BN hold no clout in the ruling pact.

DAP adviser Lim Kit Siang demanded to know if Dompok's claim was merely "hot air".

But a Sabah BN insider confirmed with The Malaysian Insider yesterday that Dompok had spoken the truth, based on the Cabinet meeting minutes he had sighted.

The leader said that federal ministers had agreed to the formation of the RCI on February 8 and had tasked Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Seri Mohamed Nazri Aziz to co-ordinate the scope of the RCI's investigation.

At the Cabinet's last meeting on Wednesday, February 15, a day before Najib's Sabah trip, Nazri tabled a rough draft of the RCI's terms of reference for discussion, the leader added.

"It was discussed but the terms of reference were not finalised because Cabinet wanted input from Sabah BN parties and the state government.

"And for that (reason), despite the huge expectation that the PM would announce the RCI on February 16, he was simply not ready to announce it," the BN leader had said.

But the leader also admitted that Najib's unexpected silence on the issue had not only angered but also embarrassed Sabah BN leaders, particularly those in UPKO and PBS, who have been trumpeting their success in pushing for the RCI.

The unchecked influx of illegals in Sabah has been a longstanding problem in the BN-ruled state, and has usually been blamed for the rise in social, economic and security problems suffered by the locals here.

According to replies provided in Parliament last year, Sabah's populace numbered 651,304 in 1970 and grew to 929,299 a decade later. But in the two decades following 1980, the state's population rose significantly by a staggering 1.5 million people, reaching 2,468,246 by 2000.

Media reports said that as of 2010, this number has grown further to 3.12 million, with foreigners making up a sizeable 27 per cent or 889,799 of the population.

Opposition leaders have long raged against the BN government for this population explosion, alleging that illegals have been allowed into the east Malaysian state, and given MyKads and voting rights to help the ruling coalition cling to power.

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