

No manipulation of judges in Felda suits, says Najib
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By Shannon Teoh

KUALA LUMPUR, March 24 — Datuk Seri Najib Razak denied PKR allegations that his administration's manipulating judges in the FELDA suits.

The prime minister told reporters the claims by the opposition party were "a complete distortion of facts" and will be refuted in Parliament next week.

"It is not true. It was a complete distortion of facts," the Umno president said after chairing an Umno supreme council meeting late last night.

"Datuk Ahmad Maslan has all the facts," he added, referring to the Deputy Minister in the Prime Minister's Department in charge of the federal land development scheme.

PKR accused the prime minister on Monday of influencing the courts in on-going FELDA cases, and claimed to have evidence to back up its allegations.

Citing minutes of a meeting between Najib and FELDA management on June 27 in Parliament last year, PKR secretary-general Datuk Saifuddin Nasution read out excerpts that he said "proved" alleged attempts to interfere with FELDA court cases.

"Make sure judges and lawyers are given understanding of the subject and technical means in which to calculate the OER (oil extraction rate) to ensure that FELDA wins the cases and is not compromised," the Machang MP read from the excerpts to reporters.

The Machang MP pointed out that there were currently four court cases concerning FELDA settlers and the OER, and that this disclosure made it difficult to believe that justice would be served in courts.

The PKR leader said the government needed to guarantee fair trials for all FELDA settlers, adding that this also cast serious doubts on the outcome of the legal action taken by settlers who are against FELDA's listing.

Last month, eight FELDA settlers won a temporary court order blocking the transfer of shares from FELDA Investment Co-operative (KPF) to FELDA Global Ventures Holdings (FGVH), a crucial step in the government's plan to list the plantation firm unit.

FGVH's listing, first mooted by Najib in his Budget 2012 speech, will see the loss-making unit take control of assets now under the KPF.

Putrajaya said last week it will push ahead with the proposed listing in June, with or without the 51 per cent stake in commercial arm FELDA Holdings held by settlers.

The government previously insisted it had backing from a majority of settlers, despite reports of widespread opposition.

FELDA announced that proceeds from the IPO will now be channelled into a special purpose vehicle (SPV) to ensure settlers benefit directly from the listing, after the court blocked the shares transfer.

But PKR charged that the SPV would only lower FGVH's listing value, adding that the government's decision was a direct snub to KPF.

The co-operative has over 220,000 members, of which 112,635 are FELDA settlers while the rest are FELDA employees and children of settlers.

Reuters reported last month Putrajaya may delay FGVH's listing due to settlers' opposition, which risks undermining Barisan Nasional's (BN) support from voters long considered the ruling pact's vote bank.

Critics contend that the proposed listing, which will see loss-making FGVH assume control of KPF, will shortchange settlers and saddle FELDA with up to RM1.5 billion in yearly deficits.

FGVH subsidiaries such as FELDA Iffco Sdn Bhd, FELDA Global Technologies, FELDA Global Ventures Middle East and FELDA Global Ventures Arabia are reported to have chalked up accumulated losses of around RM500 million up to last year.

But Ahmad has said the unit recorded pre-tax profits of RM203 million and RM366 million in 2009 and 2010, respectively.

FELDA Holdings has a workforce of some 19,000 employees, with a labour force of 46,795 workers at 300 estates, 70 palm oil mills, seven refineries, four kernel-crushing plants, 13 rubber factories, manufacturing plants and logistic and bulking installations in Malaysia and overseas.

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