

Cancel deal with Tabung Haji, sell land to 'willing buyers', Tony Pua tells 1MDB
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Instead of selling the land it bought from 1Malaysia Development Bhd (1MDB), Lembaga Tabung Haji should cancel their deal and demand a full refund from the state investment firm, a DAP lawmaker said today.

Petaling Jaya Utara MP Tony Pua said the pilgrims' fund should not have to bear the responsibility of finding buyers for the land, which it bought from 1MDB last month for RM188.5 million.

He said selling the plot of land also did not erase the fact that Tabung Haji had "bailed out" the debt-ridden company by buying the land at RM2,773 per square feet (psf), when it was worth RM64 psf just four years ago.

"1MDB ended up the winner because regardless of whether Tabung Haji is successful in on-selling the piece of land for a profit or otherwise, it has collected the RM188 million in cash which would be immediately utilised to repay its mounting interest commitments," said Pua in a statement.

"Why should Tabung Haji basically undertake the entire risk of holding the land on behalf of 1MDB to look for a buyer?"

"Why couldn't 1MDB have found the alleged willing-buyers who were not only so readily available, they are allegedly willing to pay RM5 million more than what Tabung Haji had paid?"

Yesterday, Tabung Haji announced it had decided to sell the land it bought from 1MDB upon advice from the prime minister, following public outcry over the transaction.

Tabung Haji chairman Datuk Seri Abdul Azeez Abdul Rahim said Najib had advised him to dispose of the land so that the fund's reputation is not "tarnished" due to its business transaction with 1MDB, and in order to respect the "sensitivity" of Tabung Haji depositors.

The land will be sold to a buyer at a profit of at least RM5 million and will be concluded within the next few weeks, Azeez said.

Azeez also said the fund had already found three potential buyers, leading Pua to question why 1MDB could not have similarly found other willing buyers instead of turning to the pilgrims' savings fund.

"Since they are indeed able to find three potential buyers within 24 hours who are willing to acquire the land from Tabung Haji, then Datuk Seri Najib Razak should not be instructing Tabung Haji to dispose of the land," said Pua.

"Instead, as the responsible Finance Minister, he should demand the cancellation of the 1MDB-Tabung Haji transaction, as well as instruct 1MDB to refund the payment made by Tabung Haji and to negotiate with these three potential buyers directly.

"There is absolutely no necessity to involve and abuse the funds of the Muslim pilgrims."

The DAP publicity chief said Tabung Haji had betrayed Muslims who had entrusted it to manage their funds so that they could perform their haj, or pilgrimage, to Mecca.

However, Azeez yesterday said that that none of the depositors' money was used to buy the plot of land from 1MDB, and that it had used a ready allocation set aside to invest in real estate.

Azeez defended the decision of the Tabung Haji board in making the purchase, saying that they did "no wrong" and it was merely a "commercial decision".

"We have dignity too. The people who sit (on Tabung Haji) board have vast experience. Anyone who needs answers on this matter, we will provide them," he added.

Meanwhile, DAP's parliamentary leader Lim Kit Siang also said Najib should break his silence and explain his role in Tabung Haji's land deal with 1MDB since he is chairman of the fund's advisory board.

"If Najib had not approved the Tabung Haji's land deal with 1MDB, then let him reveal who is the minister who had given the approval and the reasons why.

"The prime minister cannot continue with his policy of elegant silence while giving private and meaningless assurances that 'he will not protect those involved' if there was any wrongdoing," Lim said in a statement.

The Gelang Patah MP noted that Najib's cousin, Umno vice-president Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Hussein had also "broken ranks" and joined Umno deputy president Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin and another party vice-president Datuk Seri Shafie Apdal to express concerned about the government's credibility over 1MDB.

"(This) tantamounts to a vote of no-confidence in Najib's initiative in early March asking the Auditor-General to audit the 1MDB accounts," Lim said, adding that Najib should direct the national auditor to table in an interim report on its probe into 1MDB.

A blog called "The Benchmark" on May 5 leaked documents that detailed Tabung Haji's plans to buy two plots of land from 1MDB at the site of the Tun Razak Exchange (TRX) project.

Tabung Haji subsequently confirmed it RM188.5 million purchase for one of the two plots, a 0.63ha piece of land drawing outcry from fund depositors and political leaders from both sides of the divide, given that 1MDB is known to be sitting on a pile of RM42

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