

## International

# Malaysia anti-graft agents quiz former Prime Minister

## Government tots up ballooning debt

**KUALA LUMPUR:** Former Malaysian premier Najib Razak completed his statement to anti-graft agents yesterday, as the Southeast Asian country's new government revealed some \$50 billion of liabilities adding to debt left behind by Najib's scandal-hit administration. Defeated at the polls two weeks ago, Najib was summoned to explain suspicious transfers of \$10.6 million into his bank account, just a fraction of billions of dollars that went missing from 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB), a state fund that he had founded during almost a decade in power.



### New government vows to find out where 1MDB money went

The new government led by 92-year-old Mahathir Mohamad has vowed to find out where the 1MDB money went and punish those responsible. Najib has denied wrongdoing, though the new head of the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) this week described how an investigation into 1MDB had been suppressed three years ago to stop charges being brought against him.

Najib, 64, appeared relaxed as he left the MACC headquarters some seven hours after arriving. Smiling, he put a finger to his lips to shush journalists so that he could speak. "I have answered all questions as best as I could. And MACC has carried out their duties well and professionally," Najib said, almost exactly what he said after his first visit to the agency two days earlier. He said the MACC had told him the "statement-session" was over. Malaysians are now wondering if charges will be filed. The new government has barred

Najib and his wife, Rosmah Mansor, from leaving the country.

#### Whistleblower

While Najib was giving his statement, agents also met Xavier Justo, a Swiss national who was the first whistleblower in the 1MDB affair. Journalists saw Justo in the MACC lobby half an hour before Najib arrived. Najib's statement relates to the transfers of 42 million ringgit (\$10.6 million) into his bank account that investigators tracked back to SRC International, a former unit of 1MDB.

Mahathir met Justo on Sunday. It was documents leaked by the former director of energy group PetroSaudi International, which ran an energy joint venture with 1MDB from 2009 to 2012 that triggered investigations in at least six countries. Mahathir quit as prime minister in 2003 after leading Malaysia for 22 years, but came out of retirement to join the opposition after becoming convinced that Najib, his former protege, was corrupt. Investigators have searched Najib's home and several properties, seizing cash, jewelry and luxury items estimated to be worth millions of dollars. The Star newspaper reported yesterday that the cash found totaled 130 million ringgit (nearly \$33 million).

#### From bad to worse

Mahathir has also accused Najib's government of understating the national debt and blamed it for abuses that have caused debt to balloon. Finance Minister Lim Guan Eng said



**PUTRAJAYA:** Malaysia's former Prime Minister Najib Razak speaks to the media after being questioned at the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) office in Putrajaya yesterday. — AFP

Najib's government had committed to making lease payments of 201.4 billion ringgit (\$50.62 billion) for several projects that were designed to circumvent the federal government guarantee and debt limits. The extra obligations brought Malaysia's total debt and liabilities to over 1.087 trillion ringgit as of Dec. 31, 2017, or 80.3 percent of gross domestic product, Lim told reporters.

Earlier this week, Lim said the Najib government had deceived the public and parliament over the country's finances and 1MDB. He also said treasury officials and the country's auditor

general were unable to access certain accounts and reports. In a late night Facebook post on Wednesday, Najib said Mahathir and his finance minister's "alarming and confusing" remarks about the country's debts and 1MDB liabilities "tell half the story".

"While you may want to slander and put all the blame on me to give a perception of a dire financial position to justify why you cannot deliver on your manifesto promises ... you must remember that the country and our people come first," he wrote. — Reuters

## Hit by wild weather, Kenya's herders fire up a hot new crop

**KITENGELA:** In this arid stretch of Kajiado County, where worsening heat and drought have been tough on livestock farmers, Arnold Ole Kapurua is experimenting with a hot new crop: chillis. Ole Kapurua, 29, a farmer and agronomist, now grows two acres of the fiery pods - and is training other farmers to do the same - as a way to protect their incomes in the face of harsher weather linked to climate change.

"With time we realised that we weren't making good money as our livestock income stagnated," he said. "During drought we lost our herds to hunger and diseases while during the rainy season we lost some to floods making us live on a lean budget." But after a bit of research, "I realized that chillis had climate friendly features," he said. While some farmers still rely entirely on livestock in the

region, a growing number are now concentrating their energy on farming chilli, which can be grown with limited amounts of water, said Samuel Ole Kangangi'r, another new chilli farmer.

Over the last five years, more than 100 farmers in the region have begun growing chilli, most after trying other crops, including maize and beans, that didn't cope as well with drought and brought in little money, the farmers said. Well-managed chilli farms can produce an ongoing harvest over six months, with an acre of land producing up to two tones of peppers a week, Ole Kapurua said.

That level of harvest can bring as much as 80,000 Kenyan shillings (\$800) a season, he said. "That cannot be compared to livestock rearing as one cannot afford to be selling a cow every week thus making chilli farming a better option," said the farmer. Solomon Simingor another farmer in Kajiado County, said a farmer with at least two acres of land can earn as much as three times more with chilli than with cattle, in his experience. To provide enough water to keep their plants irrigated, farmers in the region are turning to building small dams to catch water in the rainy season. —Reuters

## Malaysian state-linked media left scrambling after election upset

**KUALA LUMPUR:** After decades of slavishly backing the only government Malaysia had ever known, state-linked media are scrambling to find their feet after the election landslide, seeking to shed a reputation as official mouthpieces but facing a challenge from plucky independent websites. The coalition led by scandal-plagued Najib Razak unexpectedly lost power at the May 9 polls for the first time since independence from Britain in 1957, defeated by a reformist alliance that promised sweeping changes. The toppling of the authoritarian regime has fuelled hopes of a new era.

State-linked media, which had seemed increasingly out of step with the views of many Malaysians yearning for change, wasted no time in switching their support to the new government. They had spent years backing ex-leader Najib-reporting in only a muted fashion on a massive financial scandal that helped to topple his regime-but quickly began giving blanket coverage to a flurry of fresh revelations related to the controversy, and to the new government

of 92-year-old Mahathir Mohamad. Traditionally pro-government media insist they are happy that the shackles have come off and they can now report in a more balanced and fair fashion. Wong Chun Wai, group managing director and chief executive officer of The Star Media Group-which produces leading daily The Star-told AFP it was "a breath of fresh air for all of us". "The public wants reports that will have perspectives from all sides. The media, I am sure, will look forward to that."

But the quick change of tack of some TV stations and newspapers has sparked criticism that they are simply following a decades-old impulse to back the government of the day, and are more interested in their own survival than in fair and balanced reporting. Jahabar Sadiq, who has set up leading news portals in recent years, told AFP that traditional media "seem to be lurching to the other side" by supporting the new government. It appears "they haven't changed their spots but are just going for the newest master in town", he added. —AFP