

 Thu, March 26 2009 - THE Dewan Rakyat passed the Human Rights Commission (Amendment) Bill after a one-day debate at both policy and committee stages because Suhakam might have lost its Grade A listing if did not make changes before the March 26 deadline today.

The Barisan Nasional won both the bloc division votes by a slim majority of nine votes at the policy stage (45 Barisan Nasional MPs voted for the Bill and 36 opposition MPs against) and of 11 votes at the committee stage (50 Barisan MPs voted for it and 39 opposition MPs against).

Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Seri Nazri Abdul Aziz, in his reply, said the proposed amendments to the Suhakam Act was to comply with requirements set by International Coordinating Committee of National Institutions for the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights (ICC).

As a member of the United Nations, we have to comply with the ICC requirements, said Nazri.

On why the Government had delayed tabling the Bill when notice of the possible downgrade had been issued in April last year, Nazri said: The papers and views from various agencies only came back to us on Oct 13, last year.

There was General Election (March 2008), the formation of Cabinet, Royal Address, supplementary supply Bills and others to handle. We only have three days to debate Bills and there are so many Bills pending, he said.

During the debate on the Bill, that had been tabled for first reading only on Tuesday at 5.30pm, Opposition MPs protested the haste in pushing it through.

Lim Kit Siang (DAP Ipoh Timur), who was suspended in the morning for few hours after a heated argument erupted between him and the Backbenchers during the debate, returned in the afternoon to propose three amendments to the Bill during the committee stage.

However, Deputy Speaker Datuk Ronald Kiandee shot them down saying that required one day's notice.

Winding up the debate at the committee stage, Nazri said he would look into R. Sivarasa (PKR Subang) suggestion that Suhakam members serve full time.

At the Parliament lobby, Lim said the indecent haste in passing the Bill showed the Government's lack of commitment in upholding human rights.

The Government was given a year by the ICC to make changes to the appointment process, he told a press conference.

Instead, they waited until the last minute without giving MPs proper notice. Lim said the proposed amendments would not help Suhakam retain the earlier Grade A given by the ICC.

He added that the appointments should be made objectively and given to those well-versed in human rights and had proper background in the field.

Meanwhile at the Parliament lobby later, Nazri said the opposition should support the Bill unless they wanted Suhakam to be downgraded.