

PROVE IT, SAYS DR M

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By M. VEERA PANDIYAN

MALACCA, Thurs. — Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad challenged critics of the Government today to prove their claim that certain people have profited through fraudulent means in the awarding of the contract for the privatisation of the \$3.4 billion North-South Highway.

The Prime Minister also asked them to prove their allegations of "irregularities" in the awarding of the contract. He said that all procedures were closely followed and there was no hint of fraud as alleged by an opposition party.

"Accusations that I had received money from the privatisation of the highway project are outright lies," Dr Mahathir said at the opening of the Air Keroh-Senawang Highway this morning.

Dr Mahathir explained at length that the Government privatised the highway project because of the high cost of construction and maintenance of the highway.

He said the Government could build the highway by itself and not collect tolls but then, it would have to increase various taxes and the petrol price to meet the construction cost and this would not be fair to the people who did not use the highway.

"There is no question of *main main* or cheating, despite what some quarters allege," Dr Mahathir said.

While Dr Mahathir was speaking at the opening ceremony at 51km of the \$258 million highway, DAP members, led by party secretary-general Lim Kit Siang gathered not far from the dais, displaying banners against the highway deal.

The DAP demonstration — similar to that organised at Kepong, Sungai Besi and Seremban — was held to protest

against the Government's decision to increase the closed system toll rates to five cents for cars, seven and a half cents for small lorries and 10 cents for heavier vehicles from Sept 15. These new rates were announced by Works Minister Datuk S. Samy Vellu this morning. (See Page 3)

The Prime Minister, who described the new toll rates as "reasonable compared to Japan where it was 30 cents per km" also hit out at a party, which he did not name, for its continued opposition to the North-South Highway project.

He said this party appeared to be

working for the good of the people but was in fact using the highway project solely as a political issue after failing for the past 30 years to get elected to rule the country.

The highway was being turned into a political controversy by the opposition because it had no more issues left, he said. The critics of the highway project were being "clever" as they knew they would not be charged in court, he added.

"They know that if they were charged, they will use the opportunity to smear

● TURN TO PAGE 3

PM tells critics: Think of the benefits

STAR 14 AUG 1987

● FROM PAGE ONE

the names of those taking them to court . . . because of this they dare to make all kinds of allegations."

Dr Mahathir also said that to prove that the Government had nothing to hide, Datuk Samy Vellu even invited the opposition party leaders to explain the procedures and allowed them to look at relevant documents.

"Maybe the Minister ought to be arrested for showing secret documents," Dr Mahathir quipped.

He advised those who opposed the privatisation of the highway project not to stand in the path of progress to the extent of robbing the people of the chance to enjoy the economic opportunities that would result from it.

Dr Mahathir said the North-South Highway had to be built as the present road system could no longer cope with the volume of traffic and more modern vehicles. It was also to ensure a faster and safer road system, he said.

He urged the people not to view the highway solely as a road on which tolls must be paid but as an economic effort which could benefit everyone since the project would create job opportunities and economic activities related to the road construction industry.

He said that the Government had to privatise the highway project because revenue from collection of road tax and other related taxes was only enough to pay for the construction and maintenance of roads within the towns and villages.

As a result of privatising the highway, the people would also benefit from the 40 per cent income tax that would be collected from the company, he said.