

Dr M: Bakun dam project can serve as catalyst

BELAGA, Mon. — The RM15 billion Bakun hydro-electric dam project will serve as a catalyst for the further industrialisation of the country, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today.

Describing it as one of the most important projects in the country, the Prime Minister said he had high hopes that the project would start without any hitch since Ekran Berhad, the company awarded the project, has a good track record.

He also said nobody should accuse the Government of practising favouritism towards Tan Sri Ting Pek Khiing, Ekran's executive chairman.

He said the project was awarded to Ekran Berhad based on the belief that it would complete the Bakun project within the targeted time frame.

"Ekran was awarded the project not because I want Ting to be rich but his track record shows that he can complete the project swiftly," he said, adding that Ting had built a 300-room hotel in Langkawi in just 52 days.

"Furthermore, Ekran is a public listed company in which people also own shares," he said at the dam ground-breaking ceremony here.

The Bakun project is expected to take off fully by the middle of next year pending the completion of environmental impact assessment (EIA) studies.

Dr Mahathir also said Malaysians have the right to determine their own

destiny without interference and preaching from foreigners.

He expressed the hope that these outsiders would understand the country and its aspirations.

"But there are those, especially the foreign media and environmental activists, who prefer to see us live primitively.

"They only want us to preserve our forest to be their green lung. We have the right to develop our forest but with a great deal of care," he added.

The Bakun project has generated much controversy as it involves the development of 80,000ha of forest and the relocation of about 7,000 natives.

The Prime Minister, who described the project as one of the most important since it would provide a major source of power supply, also criticised Bruno Manser, a Swiss activist, who had been carrying out campaigns against Bakun's development.

Meanwhile, *Bernama* reports that the project will set a number of Malaysian, Asian and international records.

According to the souvenir booklet issued in conjunction with the ground-breaking works, four world records and a Southeast Asian and Malaysian record would be created with the implementation of the project.

The 648km submarine cable to be laid on the South China seabed to bring electricity from Sarawak to Peninsular Malaysia would be the longest

of its kind in the world.

The high-voltage direct current link-up system from Kapit to Kuala Lumpur, a distance of some 1,777km, would also be the longest in the world.

It also represented the biggest privatised hydro-electric project in the world.

The hydro dam to be built would be the largest in Southeast Asia and it would be the biggest privatised project to be implemented in Malaysia.

It would be able to generate some 2,000mw of power.

Ting said that his company was now proceeding with all the preparatory work for aspects of the project which did not require an EIA report.

The company would proceed with the construction of the necessary facilities such as the workers' camp, administrative office and accommodation facilities, while awaiting for the approval of the EIA report on the project proper, which is expected in June next year.

He said the whole preliminary job would cost only RM50 million.

Ting expected the project to be completed in six years.

On the EIA report, he said that Universiti Sarawak Malaysia, which had been given the task of carrying out the study, was expected to submit the report by March next year and approval by the Department of Environment should be obtained by June.