

Bakun project has more advantages than disadvantages

KUALA LUMPUR, Wed. Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said the Government approved the Bakun hydroelectric project in Sarawak because it had far more advantages than disadvantages.

For instance, the Prime Minister said, using water was the cheapest and cleanest method to generate electricity. Besides, the country must also diversify its sources of energy for power generation and water was one of the most abundant sources.

He described the Bakun project as "very good". Comparing it with Kenyir in Terengganu, which covers 39,000 hectares and able to generate 400 megawatt, Bakun which covers 69,000 hectares, could generate 2,400 megawatt or six times more.

In an interview over RTM tonight, the Prime Minister was asked to what extent the Bakun project could help expedite the country's economic development process.

Dr Mahathir said the need for energy in the country increased so rapidly that it made it necessary for the Government to use all available sources of energy. "If we were to depend only on one source, we will face problems should anything happen," he said.

When asked that the project could be costly compared to gas-based power generation, Dr Mahathir said while this could be true, gas was not a permanent source of energy.

"But we believe Bakun is permanent. As long as there is rain, there will be energy from Bakun."

Although the capital investment for Bakun would be high, the daily generation of power would not involve expenses as Bakun would only rely on water flow.

"If it's gas, we must buy it, bring it to the destinations and burn it for use. There are many other things we have to do and (as a result) the cost to generate power will be higher than using water."

The flooding of forests for the project should be viewed in a positive light, like forests in other places were being exploited for their produce, he said when asked to comment on the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) report which said the project would have adverse impact on the flora and fauna in the area.

"If we leave the forests untouched, we would not even have a place to live. So we have to weigh between the benefits we can derive from them and leaving them in their natural state.

"I think we should be rational in this matter. While we have to preserve the environment, we also have to be concerned with our lives, and our lives depend on certain resources, one of which is the energy that can be generated by water."

Dr Mahathir said more than 50 per cent of the land area in Malaysia was covered by forests and part of it had to be used for other purposes.

Malaysia has the largest forest area (in the world) in percentage terms. Fifty per cent of the country is under forest and if gardens and areas cultivated with rubber, oil palm and other crops were to be included, then the area with trees covers 70 per cent of the country.

"In Europe only 15 per cent of their areas is covered with forests which are also not like ours. So, we have looked after our forests, but we must utilise part of them for other benefits."

The Government is not hiding anything on the Bakun project. Some parties, like non-governmental organisations (NGOs), oppose the EIA report merely because they want to reject it without listening to clarifications.

Asked why the EIA report on the Bakun project was displayed to the public after the Government had approved it and that this could give the impression the authorities were hiding something, Dr Mahathir said it was normal practice.

"We display it to get comments. Actually, there are parties such as the NGOs which, no matter what the report is, will reject it. With them, there are no compromises. They just do not want it without listening to reason.

"But we displayed it for those who understand environmental matters.

"If the public, the kampung people, for example, are given this report, they will not possibly understand. This is not a report which could be easily understood because it is so complex and done by experts who are really knowledgeable in this field. In the report, they showed there were disadvantages, but the advantages are far more than the disadvantages. That is why we made the

decision."

On allegations that only Syarikat Ekran Berhad would benefit from the Bakun project, and that others would not, Dr Mahathir said it was "not true".

"We engage Ekran as a big company to lead in the project. We need a company that can make decisions. If we have 10 companies grouping with it, it is impossible to make a decision.

"We need to implement the project in six years. The report said it will take 12 years. If it is 12 years we will lose a lot.

"Ekran did not take a big share, actually it is a minority shareholder. Those becoming shareholders include the Sarawak State Government itself, Bumiputeras and certain bodies which have been offered shares.

"Ekran, though having minority share, was given the task to implement this project because of its record which showed that it was capable of implementing projects fast."

Asked on the need to possibly explain the Bakun project to the public in view of its complexity, he said it was not the public, but the NGOs (which made an issue out of it).

The area to be inundated is not 1.5 million hectares but only 70,000 hectares.

"They blow it up as though if the area is flooded, hundreds of animals, human beings and the rest will perish. This is not true.

"The residents there will be relocated to other areas and provided facilities more than those currently given."

On whether the Bakun area would eventually become a tourist spot, he said, it would, like the Kenyir dam, attract tourists.

"In fact, we have plans to create eco-tourism here (in Bakun) so that everybody can enjoy going there."

Asked whether the Government also planned to replant trees in the area, Dr Mahathir said it was not necessary as the species of trees in the Bakun area could be found in other parts of Sarawak and other States of Malaysia.

Dr Mahathir said Malaysia's climate was not like that of Europe or the desert.

"We have a lot of rain. In Kuala Lumpur if we do not cut trees and grass within two or three years, it will become a jungle again," he said, adding that this enabled the Government to allow trees to be cut systematically.