

17 JUL 1996

FLAWED COMMUNICATION STRATEGY CAUSES BAKUN HICCUP, SAYS DEAN

KUALA LUMPUR, July 17 (Bernama) -- Lack of concerted effort by Ekran Bhd to succinctly package the vision of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad on the importance of the Bakun hydro-electric dam project to the country precluded a thorough understanding of the people on what it can offer.

MARA Institute of Technology School of Mass Communication dean Associate Prof Dr Baharuddin Aziz said Ekran should have taken the initiative and critical steps to adopt a sound communication strategy before starting field work.

"It is no point just having pseudo-events like the groundbreaking of the Bakun dam organised and trumpeted via the local media, and then expect people to comprehend the project's raison d'etre," he added.

In this respect, the local media were also partly guilty of the hiccups in the project's implementation, he told Bernama here today.

He said: "What could potentially turn out to be the country's pride, top job provider and tourist attraction, is now the subject of litigious tirades, unfair ridicule and an object of what appears to be sinister public and non-governmental organisation (NGO) scrutiny.

"I concur with the Prime Minister that the benefits of Bakun far outweighs its encumbrances. I do not think people will be overly concerned about environmental degradation if the largest university in the world instead of the largest dam in the world were to be built on Bakun land."

This was the reason why Ekran should have taken great pains to develop a step-by-step strategy to tell people and rationalise with them why there was the need for energy, Dr Baharuddin said.

"Instead, Ekran chose to keep us in the dark," he lamented.

Ekran is the developer of the RM13.6-billion Bakun dam which would have an output of 1,770 MW when it begins full commercial operations in 2003. Tenaga Nasional Bhd has agreed to buy 1,600 MW for transmission by submarine cables to Peninsular Malaysia.

Dr Baharuddin said that in hindsight, the "observability status" of the benefits to be accrued from the the project was low.

He added: "You can have the best engineering brains in the world working on the Bakun project, but if it lacks proper management of communication and interpretation of its benefits to the people, then unforeseen and unfortunate things are bound to happen.

"A project of this magnitude, and the attention that it can generate worldwide should have a commensurate and sound management strategy that would be able to cushion or, at least, ricochet brickbats and criticisms levelled at it."

He noted that many people were of the view that the problems that have surfaced seemed to have emanated from the not uncommon and flawed allegation that certain friends of Dr Mahathir were beneficiaries of the project.

Ekran should, at the outset, have anticipated that such allegations could surface, he said.

He added: "Unfortunately, this seems not to be the case. Bakun should serve as a reminder to whoever (PM's friend or not) is to undertake mammoth projects in this country. Some Malaysians may still be using blowpipes but, generally, they are smarter these days.

"They have alternative sources of information like the Internet and

e-mail and they fax a lot. So, let there be no one who should simply go
about fooling all Malaysians all the time." -- BERNAMA
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