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Mahathir-passports (With pix)

INCREASED PASSPORT RATES TO REDUCE MALAYSIANS TRAVELLING ABROAD, DR M

PORT KLANG, Jan 2 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today that the increased rates for international passports effective yesterday is aimed at reducing the number of Malaysians travelling abroad.

He said the government had imposed the new rates after considering the fact that the number of Malaysians travelling abroad was too large.

Thirty per cent of Malaysians were travelling abroad compared with only 10 per cent from Japan which has a much larger population, he added.

"If they still want to go (overseas), they will have to pay a little bit more," he told reporters after launching the first direct trans-Pacific service of the world's largest container ship, "OOCL California", from here to the west coast of the United States.

The rates for the international passports valid for five years have been increased from RM60 to RM145 for 32 pages and from RM100 to RM265 for 64 pages. For renewals, the rates will be from RM10 to RM20 per year for 32 pages and from RM20 to RM40 per year for 64 pages.

Dr Mahathir said that the new rates would only discourage some people from travelling abroad.

"We cannot stop everyone (from travelling abroad) but we can at least prevent some from applying for passports without any plans for travel," he added.

Dr Mahathir said that these people, who feel insecure without a passport, only "jammed up" the Immigration Department.

Meanwhile, in KUALA LUMPUR, Deputy Home Minister Datuk Megat Junid Megat Ayub said that the government imposed the new rates to reduce the number of Malaysians vacationing abroad and help towards lowering the nation's deficit of RM18 billion.

The move was implemented after a study revealed that the number of Malaysians spending more than two nights abroad was six million, some 30 per cent of the nation's population, he told reporters after attending a gathering at the Immigration Department headquarters in conjunction with the new year.

Malaysians crossing into neighbouring countries for day trips numbered some 18 million a year, he said.

He said the move was objected to by people who claimed it was not in line with the government's zero-inflation campaign but it was one way to reduce Malaysians from spending too much abroad.

"Those who are rich can go abroad while the middle income group could spend their vacation in the country," he said.

He said the increase in rates was not a profit-making move unlike in several foreign countries which imposed exit tax of up to RM500.

Megat Junid said the new rate was appropriate since the last revision was 10 years ago.

However, the government would consider cases involving students as well as the poor who needed to travel abroad, he said.

He said the move also allowed the Immigration Department to monitor passport applications to prevent abuse.

Megat Junid also said the move was part of the strategy to reduce the country's deficit and other departments under the Home Ministry would also be involved.

"Three months ago, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has

asked the Immigration Department to find ways to reduce the nation's deficit of RM18 billion which could be used for other purposes," he said.

"The department has suggested that one method was to increase the fees for travel documents as well as levy on foreign workers," he added.

Dr Mahathir also commented on public complaints on the increase of prices of goods and service fees like toll charges.

He said that the government had taken the necessary measures to curb such increases but imposition of toll charges had to be implemented.

"For example, Metramac has constructed a road for some time...toll charges were not imposed for years until it was fully completed. That was a condition it has to comply.

"Toll charges should have been imposed in 1990...for five years toll charges were not imposed... imagine the amount not collected. Now, we must allow its recovery," he added.

Dr Mahathir said that toll charges were imposed on those who own vehicles while those using public transport had only to pay a small sum.

Asked to comment on the reluctance of the public to use public transport due to the inefficiency of the system, he said that public transport operators should upgrade efficiency for the convenience of the public. -- Bernama