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Mahathir - tunnel

ROAD BUILDERS SHOULD CONSTRUCT TUNNELS WHERE NECESSARY

KUALA LUMPUR, Feb 6 (Bernama) -- Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today companies offered contracts to build roads in Malaysia will have to abide by conditions that they construct tunnels at appropriate areas to reduce damage to the environment.

The Prime Minister said even though the cost of building tunnels was quite high, they were necessary to protect the environment from too many hill levelling and tree felling activities.

"As far as possible when we build roads, we no longer have to cut and fill hills. On the other hand we want tunnels and viaducts to be used so that we don't damage our hilly areas," he told reporters after launching the first tunnel construction of the Light Rail Transit (LRT) System Two here.

The building of the 4.4 km tunnel which runs through the city centre, from Central Market to Jalan Ampang, will see the use of tunnel boring machines for construction in Malaysia for the first time.

The cost of constructing the tunnel 18 metres (about 60 feet) below ground cost RM680 million and will be fully completed in the middle of next year.

Dr Mahathir said even though the condition stated "as far possible" it would nevertheless be strictly enforced in the building of roads in areas where it was clear that many hills would have to be levelled or trees would have to be felled.

"We have to study case by case. We cannot make a general ruling which might not be viable or be costly," he said.

The use of local materials would also not probably reduce the cost of constructing tunnels, he added.

Hence people should be willing to pay a little more for the use of facilities constructed at high costs, the Prime Minister said.

"We want to preserve the environment, we also want roads and at the same time we refuse to pay....if you want something good, you have to pay for it," he said.

Dr Mahathir said people by right should not complain too much when payment for the use of certain facilities was raised a little bit.

Malaysians should be grateful that cost of services in this country was still very low when compared to those in many other countries.

"For instance in Japan, to cross a bridge which is more or less the same length as the Penang Bridge, we have to pay RM200 but here we pay only RM7.50. You want a bridge but you don't want to pay, that is not possible," he said.

Earlier Dr Mahathir said the government had never shirked its responsibility to the people after privatising any public utility.

On the contrary the government had been continuing to subsidise companies which had taken over the public utility to ensure people did not have to pay more for services which had been privatised, he said.

"I wish to stress here, even though we privatise a project, the subsidy element is bound to be there. Like in the case of PLUS (Projek Lebuh raya Utara Selatan), if there is no subsidy, people will have to pay two or three times more," he said.

Hence it was difficult for the government to direct companies operating privatised services to impose low charges as this would cause the government to provide a bigger subsidy to them, he said.

The LRT System Two being developed by PUTRA was expected to be fully completed in 1999. -- BERNAMA