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All eyes now on how Kedah realises international airport project

Saiful Azhar Abdullah

THERE must have been much excitement at last Wednesday's Kedah Executive Council meeting at Wisma Darul Aman when Menteri Besar Tan Sri Sanusi Junid revealed the contents of a fascimile from Dr Mahathir Mohamad in London.

An exuberant Sanusi announced later to the Press that the Prime Minister had approved the construction of a new international airport in Kedah.

To be modelled after the Kansai International Airport in Osaka, Japan, the new airport will be built on a man-made island to be reclaimed off the Kuala Muda coast, about 140km from Alor Star.

The approval from the top settles the "intense lobbying" by Kedah, Penang and Perak to get Federal Government approval for the location of the airport in their respective States.

Since the idea of a new international airport to complement the Bayan Lepas International Airport was floated in the late 1980s, the three States have been seen trying to outmanoeuvre one another for the project.

Penang and Perak had reportedly offered sites to the Federal Government for the airport.

Kedah only seriously entered the fray after Sanusi initiated the RM30 billion reclamation project along the State's coast.

Its selection has been viewed by certain quarters in Kedah as a "victory" for the State but this should not be the case.

A lot of responsibility comes with the project which will also benefit Thailand and Indonesia, both members of the northern growth triangle.

The onus is on the State Government and developer of the reclamation project to ensure that the project materialises as envisaged.

The reclamation project initiated by Sanusi has been intensely debated since it was mooted several months ago with many questioning its viability.

There may have been more pessimism than optimism as the State Government had only approved the reclamation work, and because the projects proposed by the developer, Samudera Baru Darul Aman, on the reclaimed land required Federal Government approval.

The Federal Government's approval for the airport on the reclaimed land is a shot in the arm for the State Government and the developer.

It should motivate them to ensure the reclamation project bears fruit. All eyes are now on Kedah on how it will go about implementing the project.

The Federal Government must have weighed various considerations before deciding to pick Kuala Muda as the site for the new airport.

Some may question the need for a new international airport so close to the Bayan Lepas International Airport in Penang.

But the congestion at the airport speaks for itself. There is a need for another international airport in the northern region.

Over two million passengers use the Penang airport annually. Although its current cargo capacity is 60,000 tonnes, it is actually handling about 94,000 tonnes.

The congested situation at the Penang airport is good enough reason for the Federal Government to approve a new international airport for the State.

The furious pace of development in South Kedah is another factor which rationalises the need for the airport.

Gurun and Jeniang towns, both about 50km from Kuala Muda, are set to emerge as a hub for heavy industries. Sungai Petani, the second fastest growing town in the country, is growing at a steady pace.

The growth of these major towns will be able to support the new international airport. More importantly, the airport will facilitate the regional co-operation between businessmen under the IMT-GT.

Various mega projects, mostly joint ventures initiated by the private sector under the growth triangle, demand sophisticated infrastructure facilities.

Other sites in Kedah may not be suitable for a project of such magnitude.

To build an airport of Kansai's stature requires more than 200ha of land, and obviously any attempt at a land acquisition exercise will be daunting.

It may take several years to complete but the Government, having chosen to reclaim land, will not have to battle this tedious problem.

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