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M'SIA-THAILAND LAND BRIDGE PROJECT IS CRITICAL, SAYS MAHATHIR

KUALA LUMPUR, Nov 11 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has said that the government regarded the RM10 billion land bridge linking the northern peninsula to Thailand as critically necessary to prevent the domestic economy from slipping into recession.

"We are not poverty stricken to the extent that we can't do anything at all," he said.

Dr Mahathir stressed that the government had never given the undertaking that it would halt the country's development until the ringgit regained its value.

"All we have said is that what we cannot afford, we will not do. (If) we can afford, we will continue," he said when speaking to reporters after a question and answer session at the "Global Panel Kuala Lumpur 1997" conference here today.

Should the government stop all the development projects, then it would be "one sure way of creating a recession," he said.

Last May the Malaysian Senate was told that the proposed land bridge linking Butterworth with Songkhla would be built once both countries agreed on a suitable route.

The parliamentary secretary in the Prime Minister's Department then Datuk Azmi Khalid told the Senate the project would be implemented by the private sector under the Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle (IMT-GT).

Azmi said it would comprise four important components -- a road, railway line, and crude oil and gas pipelines.

He said the government would not want to hinder economic activities to the extent that would leave a lot of people unemployed and cause industries, particularly those in building and building materials, to close.

"It is important we continue to implement projects that are already on the ground.

"Of course we are a little bit poor now, but we have ways and means of getting around (it)," he added.

Dr Mahathir was also asked what would be discussed between him and the International Monetary Fund managing director Michel Camdessus who visits Malaysia at the end of this month.

"He will meet deputy prime minister and finance minister (Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim). If necessary I will meet Mr Camdessus."

The prime minister said regulating currency trading would be an obvious item on the agenda.

On the proposed Asian monetary fund, Dr Mahathir said there would be no necessity for the fund if it was going to be an extension of the IMF.

"We would expect the Asian fund to function differently from the IMF."

On whether Asia-Europe ties would be affected by the Southeast Asian currency turmoil, he said the exports of the Europeans to Asean would be hurt.

"By making us poorer you are impoverishing yourselves," he added.

As for his tour to Canada to promote the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) before the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation (Apec) forum this month, Dr Mahathir said he wanted to explain the project to the large number of Canadian companies involved in multimedia and information technology.

"We would like them (Canadian companies) to participate in the MSC," he added. -- BERNAMA  
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