

16 AUG 1997

Mahathir-Airport

BAYAN LEPAS AIRPORT TO BE MAINTAINED, SAYS MAHATHIR

KUALA LUMPUR, Aug 16 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today Pulau Pinang's international airport in Bayan Lepas will be maintained.

At the same time, the new northern region international airport (NRIA), to be built in Kedah will serve Kedah and Pulau Pinang as well, he said.

He said the NRIA is not only meant for Kedah but also Pulau Pinang and other states in the northern region.

"It is a Penang-Kedah airport. Penang is going to be involved (in the airport) " he told reporters after opening Gerakan's 26th annual delegates' conference here.

He said this when asked if it was economically viable to build the new airport to serve the northern region.

The NRIA will be built on a man-made island off Kedah's Kuala Muda coast, some 30 km north east of Pulau Pinang.

Dr Mahathir had on Thursday said in Jitra that the Bayan Lepas international airport may have to be closed down if there was no necessity to retain it.

Investors in Pulau Pinang still needed the services of the airport at Bayan Lepas, he said.

"So it (the Bayan Lepas airport) will still be maintained," he said.

Earlier, prior to opening the Gerakan delegates' conference, Dr Mahathir discussed the airport issue with Pulau Pinang Chief Minister Tan Sri Koh Tsu Koon at the Prime Minister's Department.

The prime minister said the NRIA would be linked to Pulau Pinang by a highway.

"There is going to be a road from Pulau Pinang to this new airport and travel time wouldn't be very long. It will just be the same as getting from Georgetown to Bayan Lepas," he said.

Dr Mahathir had said that to facilitate trade and travel between the new airport and Pulau Pinang, a bridge would be built to link the new airport and industrial areas on the island.

Asked to comment on economists who had claimed that it would not make "economic sense" to build the new airport, Dr Mahathir said:

"Well, the economists are all very clever. I want to ask these economists how many countries have they run and managed. We have managed this country quite well. We are not that stupid to put three airports in one place."

To a question, the Prime Minister said the Opposition would try to politicise the airport project.

"Of course the Opposition will try to make full use of this. But I think the people of Penang are sensible enough about this. They are not gloating over the present airport but the people who have invested there, they need the airport," he said.

But, the construction of the NRIA will have to take place because it has to serve the northern region, Dr Mahathir said.

The Prime Minister said the NRIA project would start immediately upon completion of the environmental impact assessment.

Meanwhile, Dr Koh said he was happy to hear from the Prime Minister that the Bayan Lepas airport will still be maintained.

Speaking to reporters at the Gerakan meeting here today, Dr Koh said Dr Mahathir had explained to him that the Bayan Lepas airport would be

maintained so long as there was demand for its cargo and passenger services.

"The demand will be there. We will monitor the situation and I am sure that there will be sufficient demand.

"So, there is no immediate danger of closing down the airport tomorrow. There is no reason to panic," he said. -- BERNAMA

ES rn