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Bayan Lepas airport to close (HL)

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JITRA, Thurs. - The Bayan Lepas International Airport in Penang will eventually be closed and used for "other purposes" when the northern regional international airport is built on a man-made island off the Kedah coast, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today.

As compensation for this, the major reclamation work to be carried out off Kedah will be extended to cover part of Penang as well.

Dr Mahathir also said in order to facilitate trade and travel between the new airport near Kuala Muda and Penang, a bridge would be built to link the new airport and industrial areas on Penang island.

The Prime Minister said all activities at the Bayan Lepas International Airport would eventually have to be moved to the new airport as the international airport in Penang could no longer be expanded to meet the tremendous economic growth in the region.

Dr Mahathir also cited the lack of land as the reason that would hinder the expansion of the Bayan Lepas International Airport.

The Prime Minister was speaking to reporters after a gathering at Dewan Jitra at the end of his day-long official visit to Kedah.

He was responding to questions from reporters on the future of the Bayan Lepas and Langkawi International Airport following the Government's decision to build the northern regional international airport.

"The airport in Penang can no longer be expanded because of insufficient land... it can be used for some time but when there is a vibrant growth (in the region) and the new airport is ready, we will move the activities at the Penang airport to the new airport in stages.

"If there is no necessity (to retain Bayan Lepas International Airport) we have to close it down," Dr Mahathir said when asked whether the airport in Penang would be closed down.

"This place (new airport) does not only belong to Kedah...Penang is also involved...we have never considered the airport is only for Kedah...it is for northern Malaysia," said Dr Mahathir in response to questions.

The Prime Minister said the land at Bayan Lepas International Airport would be utilised for other purposes.

"It has a higher value than the land which we are going to build (reclaim)," he added.

Asked why Kedah was chosen as the site for the new airport instead of Penang, Dr Mahathir said in fact the matter was discussed with Penang.

"Actually, Penang wanted the regional international airport to be in Penang but Kedah and Perak disagreed.

"Therefore, we have to find a solution and we decided to move it to a site nearer to Penang.

"And part of the reclamation will cover a part of Penang," he added.

Asked when the reclamation work would begin, Dr Mahathir said it would start after the approval of the environmental impact assessment.

On the call to study the environmental impact of the reclamation work on Penang, the Prime Minister said the matter was being looked into.

"We know the opposition parties are politicising the matter by saying that under (First Penang Chief Minister Tan Sri) Wong Pow Nee, Penang lost its free port status while under (Penang Chief Minister Tan Sri Koh) Tsu Koon Penang lost the international airport.

"If Penang is not a State but a part of Malaysia, it does not matter where we put it (the airport).

"When we shifted from Subang to Sepang, the people of Subang will lose but we consider it benefits Malaysia...(we have to) think Malaysian," he added.

On the Langkawi International Airport's future, Dr Mahathir said it would serve Langkawi.

The new regional airport project was approved by Dr Mahathir in June.

It would be situated on one of the islands to be reclaimed by Kuala Lumpur-based Samudera Baru Darul Aman Sdn Bhd.

In the master plan submitted by the company which was approved by the State Government, Samudera Baru Darul Aman would reclaim two islands with a total area of 6,300 hectares.

The first 2,800ha island will incorporate world class infrastructural facilities such as the integrated multi-modal transportation hub which consists of an international airport, a deepwater seaport as well as an express rail link to the mainland.

To complement the transportation hub, a 3,500ha island will be created simultaneously to house sophisticated heavy engineering, petrochemical and shipyard related industries.

On the taxation mechanism to be used by the Government to curb speculative attacks on the ringgit, Dr Mahathir said he could not reveal it.

He said limiting speculation of the currency through taxation was possible as it was not difficult to trace those who sold large amounts of the currency.

"I cannot see how they are going to hide themselves...they sold one million ringgit and nobody knows?" he added when asked to elaborate on his statement yesterday that the Government was studying various steps for a long-term solution to curb speculative attacks on the ringgit, including limiting such activities through taxation.

Dr Mahathir said the Government could not allow speculation which made the rich richer and resulted in poor nations and their people becoming poorer.

"That was why we should regard such speculative activity as a crime and take whatever action we could," he added.

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