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Ensuring KLIA has a smooth start

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TUESDAY'S announcement by Transport Minister Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik that the opening of the Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA) to commercial operation will be delayed until the first quarter of next year may come as a surprise to some.

But those who have been following the progress of the airport's construction may have anticipated that something of this nature may happen.

Although Dr Ling maintained that work on the project proper is running on schedule, a hint that some aspects of the project were behind schedule had been given by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad as early as last December.

Saying so during one of his many visits to the KLIA site, the Prime Minister, however, expressed confidence that the RM9 billion airport would be operational by January 1.

Dr Ling, in announcing the delay, said the opening of the airport to commercial operation is being pushed back to ensure that everything is in order.

"We only want to make sure that all aspects, from staff training to passenger and baggage handling and flight information systems, are synchronised well before we are ready for the opening," said the minister.

Responding to the latest development, Dr Mahathir on Thursday told the Press that he had been made to understand that the delay was not critical and that the airport would be ready for its benchmark application - the 1998 Commonwealth Games.

The Prime Minister said he expected to be briefed more fully on the latest development during his visit to the site on August 15.

Synchronisation is the key to the smooth running of the KLIA. This is not only because the airport comprises many separate components, but more so because the contract for its construction had been broken up into many packages and were awarded at different times.

While this method of contracting has helped to distribute the opportunity to more contractors and has given the Government a greater control over the selection of contractors, it has its drawbacks. One of them is integrating and synchronising the various components and systems.

Dr Ling was quick to stress that he was satisfied with the progress of work at the airport, adding that there was no delay in its construction. But the elation of all responsible for the project for the manner the progress is being made must not be untempered.

Like most other major infrastructure projects associated with the Commonwealth Games and the Multimedia Super Corridor, the KLIA is treated as a priority.

The various levels of the Government, starting with the Prime Minister and all the way down to the local authorities, are geared towards facilitating its construction.

Furthermore, this is green field project carried out on a virgin site and therefore is unhindered or unconstrained by other structures.

Getting it right must be the ultimate goal of the airport developer and operator. The experience of new airports in the world should provide the KLIA with a clear guideline of what it should and should not do.

Rushing to open the airport to commercial operation when not all components are ready or fully tested can lead to a disastrous opening,

like the one suffered by the new Denver Airport in the US when it opened in 1995.

Smaller than the KLIA - costing US\$3 billion (US\$1 = RM2.65) and with the capacity to handle 31 million passengers a year - it received negative reaction when its much touted computerised baggage handling system failed to work in the initial period of its opening.

The KLIA will have the initial handling capacity of 25 million passengers annually, rising to 60 million by the year 2020.

A smooth opening will not only enhance the country's good name, but can become a strong selling point for local and foreign contractors involved in the project.

Already, many countries and airport authorities in the region, including China, have shown keen interest to learn from our experience of developing the KLIA, especially in the area of computer-based management systems.

If everything goes smoothly, the country stands a good chance of being able to sell the technology and expertise acquired during the planning, construction and commissioning of the project.

It is a shame and a waste of opportunity if, for whatever reason, the country fails to market this expertise to other parts of the world. The careful stance of the Government, therefore, has its merit.

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