

25 MAR 1997

KLIA-Jamilus

HOW THE "DIRTY DOZEN" SAVE MALAYSIA BILLIONS

By: Azman Ujang

KUALA LUMPUR, March 25 (Bernama) -- When Datuk Jamilus Hussein was appointed head of the company to develop Kuala Lumpur's new international airport in 1993, the news raised eyebrows among the local construction industry as well as the engineering fraternity.

Many were asking whether Malaysia, or more specifically Malaysians, could build what has since been billed as the world's biggest ongoing construction job, at Sepang, 50 km south of here.

Such doubts did not seem misplaced then given the fact that most major construction jobs in the country have hitherto been developed by foreign firms with their experts and consultants.

But Jamilus, 52, who was plucked from his job as Director of Roads of the Public Works Department (PWD) to become managing director of K.L. International Airport Berhad (KLIAB), did not even have the time to grasp the full impact of the challenge that lay ahead.

The circumstances of KLIAB's formation in July 1993 were nothing short of dramatic. It has taken over as developer of K.L. International Airport (KLIA) from the Anglo-Japanese Airport Consortium Sdn Bhd (AJAC) which lost the job following the Malaysian government's decision to ban British companies from getting new government contracts.

This was in retaliation to allegations by London's Sunday Times newspaper that a British company developing a dam project in Malaysia has given kickbacks to certain Malaysian politicians. Malaysia denied the allegations.

But the episode has turned out to be much more than a blessing in disguise.

Jamilus took up the challenge by quickly assembling a team of 12 people, mostly comprising his fellow PWD engineers as the initial management team to pick up from where the AJAC left off, especially the airport's masterplan study.

"It was a challenge which any civil engineer like myself would like to go through. Maybe we won't see an airport of this size in the next 50 years or maybe in our lifetime," said Jamilus, who described the team as the "dirty dozen".

The sheer size of the project is indeed awesome in every respect.

The directive from Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad was to build a 21st century airport designed to be the most sophisticated in the region and to be ready by January 1998, or just under four years.

Construction has now reached its peak, with over 25,000 workers from at least 45 countries being put on round-the-clock shifts to complete the project, which is bound to earn for Malaysia many more superlatives.

Since then Jamilus' "dirty dozen" team has grown into a 450-strong management group which oversees a project unique on another aspect -- as many as 80 contracts were awarded in the entire package.

"It is unique that so many contracts have been awarded for a single project, just as it is a feat in itself to manage so many workers from so many countries," he said at the project site.

KLIAB is owned by the Minister of Finance Incorporated with the Finance Ministry's Secretary-General Tan Sri Clifford Herbert as its chairman.

"This arrangement has proved a success formula because financial matters are being dealt with efficiently. Because of this, the project is on schedule," said Jamilus of the project estimated to cost between RM8

billion and RM9 billion for the first phase.

The federal government has allocated RM1 billion to meet costs of land acquisition, upgrading of roads, water supply and construction of government buildings. The balance was raised through loans mainly from the Employees Provident Fund and local financial institutions.

How did a fairly inexperienced team mainly from the local PWD manage to fight all the odds to build such a massive project?

According to Jamilus, it is a question of assembling the right people in the team and having the confidence that Malaysians too could do what others could given the challenge and the right environment.

"We are not blowing our trumpet just yet. But now we have even people from overseas dropping by almost daily at my office inquiring just how did we manage a project of this size," said Jamilus, who expressed confidence that all physical works would be ready by Sept 15 to enable the trial operations and simulations of the airport to begin ahead of the operational date early next year.

Because largely home-grown PWD expertise and consultancy were used in the project instead of British, Japanese or others, Jamilus could hardly hide what has been the biggest achievement for his team -- to save billions for the country.

He could not say how much savings were actually made but said: "Before Malaysians themselves took over the helm, the government was saying the project was estimated to cost around RM20 billion but now it would only be about RM9 billion".

Citing an example, some site engineers said PWD engineers and consultants are paid civil service salaries plus some special allowances for being seconded to KLIAB.

"If AJAC had been in charge, I think the managing director alone would have been paid more than RM100,000 a month, much more than the highest paid civil servant in the country," said one engineer.

It is understood that the original builder had wanted to use thousands of specially-built imported lorries for the project, telling the government that local lorries were not good enough.

But KLIAB later discovered that available local lorries could do the job just as efficiently.

"It is easier to monitor and verify any cost runs if we are in charge rather than leaving to it others," said Jamilus.

An equally valuable lesson for Jamilus and his team has been the experience gained in building KLIA.

What would happen to KLIAB once the project is completed?

"Good question. But this is for the government to decide. But for me, I would like to take a long break or retire," said Jamilus, who according to some colleagues, has been working virtually seven days a week and more than 12 hours daily at KLIAB.

"I have put the best part of my over 30 years in government service here. It has been a very challenging time because we just can't afford any mistakes given the time that we have at our disposal."

But answering a question, Jamilus said KLIAB need not be disbanded like the team which built Singapore's famous Changi Airport, because it could go on bidding to build other major airports in the region and elsewhere in the world.

Dr Mahathir himself wants KLIA -- designed on the concept of an airport-in-the-forest and forest-in-airport amidst the green, cool environment -- to be a monument of Malaysia's commitment to sustainable development where only nothing but the best in terms of a user-friendly airport will be in place.

It will have better facilities than the Changi Airport to serve not

only as Malaysia's premier gateway to the rest of the world but also a hub
for the region. -- BERNAMA

AU RM