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KUALA SUNGAI BARU: THE RIP VAN WINKLE OF PERLIS AWAKES

A Bernama Feature

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KANGAR: Kuala Sungai Baru, a disorderly and congested traditional fishing village is now well on the way to be a new industrial town and modern port in the early years of the 21st century.

The kampung that was lost in obscurity is now the focus of investors, who are planning and launching projects that would transform the face of the century-old seaside village that is 18km to the south of the state capital Kangar.

For a start, four main projects costing RM3.6 billion have been earmarked for the kampung, that is, an industrial township, an independent power producer (IPP), an international-class port and a water supply project.

Chairman of the state land and forestry committee Che Ah binti Long told Bernama that these projects have received the blessings of the 3,000-odd villagers.

"These residents did not raise any objection when they were presented with the proposal to develop the area. In fact, they are confident that their livelihood will take a turn for the better as a result of these projects," she said.

According to the plan, the industrial town would be built, among other things, through land reclamation costing RM1.5 billion. Work is expected to commence in the middle of this year and scheduled for completion by 2007.

Hilt Mark Holding Sdn Bhd (HMHSB) has been appointed the developer of the area covering some 200 hectares and the township is expected to accommodate a population of about 100,000.

The population growth is expected because of the light and medium-scale industries, luxurious housing, resort, hotel and chalets to cater for tourists or visitors.

Che Ah, who is the assemblywoman for Simpang Empat, said the residents must be prepared to swim with the tide of development and face whatever changes brought by the influx of people in their "land of opportunities".

The IPP project costing RM1.2 billion would be built by Teknologi Tenaga Perlis Consortium Sdn Bhd from the middle of the year and is expected to start operation by 2000.

The power generated, 650MW, would be sold to Tenaga Nasional Berhad (TNB).

The international-class port costing RM750 million which would put the name of Kuala Sungai Baru on the world commercial map, is being constructed by a local developer, Pashacorp Sdn Bhd.

To be built in phases, the first would see the cargo and container port in place by the middle of next year.

Other facilities like a commercial zone, a modern jetty and a marina are slotted for the second phase and it would take 10 to 12 years to complete.

The fast pace of developments in Pulau Langkawi also offers the kampung folks new opportunities because the water supply project would channel the necessity to the duty-free island through the kampung.

The RM150-million water project started last January and the Kuala Sungai Baru water filtration plant is one of the main components.

To be completed in September, the project jointly undertaken by IPCO Constructors Sdn Bhd and Amanah Saham Anak Langkawi (ASAL) is expected to supply 54.55 million to 68.2 million litres of water a day.

Che Ah observed that changes are already underway in the area since construction works began. There are more people in the sleepy hollow and the average income of the construction workers are about RM1,000 a month.

However, she felt that a big number of the traditional fishermen should accept the fact that they need not to persist with their age-old livelihood that does not assure them of handsome returns.

As for herself, she is thankful that Kuala Sungai Baru had been selected as the engine of growth of the coastline of the country's smallest state.

Last month, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad visited the village which obtained its name from the estuary of a river which has been the source of life for the fishing community.

Chairman of the Security and Development Committee of Kampung Kuala Sungai Baru, Yahaya Chat, hoped that the projects would benefit the villagers as guaranteed by the state government and developers.

"We are willing to sacrifice in the name of development here and we always pray and hope that the villagers here are not ill-treated when the projects are ready," he said.

Yahaya said that the villagers are ready to move as requested, and they hope that the developers will keep their promise to provide them a comfortable settlement.

"We were informed that the developers had allocated 150 units of houses to replace our houses which have to be demolished. Until now we feel that what has happened to us is positive and we welcome it," he said.

The restructuring of the village, he hoped, will not affect their livelihood as inshore fishermen but will further enhance their status through various activities at the fishing jetty which will be built as promised.

"All that have been promised to us sounds sweet but we hope it will turn out to be a reality," he said.

Deputy Chairman of the Fishermen Association for South Perlis, Abu Bakar Saad, who is also one of the villagers, said that they have do doubts about the projects at the moment.

"Why must we reject development that promises to benefit us?" he asks.

On the resettlement of the fishermen, he hoped the developers would provide housing that will not burden them financially. In this respect, the value of the new house should be equivalent to the value of the land and the house to be demolished, he added.

Kuala Sungai Baru, like the tale of Rip Van Winkle, is awake and is wondering how it is to face the new century. -- Bernama

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