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Land bridge project will proceed, says Dr Mahathir

LANGKAWI, Thurs. - The Government will proceed with its plan for the RM10 billion land bridge project linking northern peninsular Malaysia and southern Thailand despite the ringgit's depreciation, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today.

Stressing that the Government would go ahead with the project as it was a very viable one, the Prime Minister said it was one of the projects that "we wish to do although it will cost us almost RM10 billion".

"The fact that our ringgit has depreciated will not mean that we cannot build this landbridge," he said at a dialogue with participants of the Malaysian International Maritime Conference which was also attended by captains of the maritime industry.

The Prime Minister had earlier declared open the conference which was jointly organised by Huswah Exhibition Sdn Bhd and the Royal Malaysian Navy.

The conference, held in conjunction with Lima '97, took place on board MV Star Pisces which is anchoring at the Tanjung Malai cruise terminal.

Dr Mahathir also welcomed investors who were interested to invest and provide their expertise to realise the landbridge project.

He said some Japanese shipping lines had already shown keen interest in participating.

"We will be getting the co-operation of Thailand because it is going to pass the Thai territory," he said.

Indonesia, which is a member of the Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle, will also be involved in the project.

In explaining the objectives of the project, Dr Mahathir pointed out the problems at the Straits of Malacca.

"There are some parts of the straits which are quite shallow and are becoming more and more dangerous to ships," he said, adding that Malaysia had to keep surveillance at the straits to avoid collisions and oil pollution.

Therefore to avoid disasters in the Straits of Malacca, the Government planned the landbridge project.

The project, raised at the official level in 1994, was initiated as a project to support a programme of economic collaboration between IMT.

The proposal called for the joint construction of a 200-km land bridge for carrying road, rail and pipeline traffic.

Design and construction of the landbridge will come from a private four-member consortium representing the three countries and Japan.

The three Asean countries hope that the landbridge will act as a catalyst for improved economic development in that region and drive the flow of businesses between their borders.

Under the plan, ships will harbour at a port to be built in the south of Langkawi.

The port will be connected with roads, railways and pipelines to facilitate the movement of trade to the port in the east coast.

Some of these facilities like the railway lines and roads are already in place.

"We need to put a pipeline to pump oil across to the other coast, on to tankers which are waiting and take the oil to countries such as South Korea, Taiwan, China and Japan," he added.

On Malaysia's efforts to reduce piracy in its waters, Dr Mahathir said

among the measures taken were installing radar and increasing patrols along the waters with the co-operation of the neighbouring countries.

Dr Mahathir was also asked on the synergy between the maritime industry and the Multimedia Super Corridor.

He said there were obviously some synergy because the shipping industry was going to use more information and rapid transmission of information.

He said MSC would invite companies from all over the world to apply their minds in the country.

On the traffic separation scheme at the Straits of Malacca, Dr Mahathir said Malaysia had an agreement with Indonesia to implement the scheme on both sides of the straits.

He said Malaysia had installed radar to monitor the traffic in the straits.

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