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Ling: New airport should not affect Penang's future

LANGKAWI, Sat. - The Government does not want to see the booming industrial growth in Penang affected by the construction of a new northern region international airport in Kuala Muda, Kedah.

Transport Minister Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik said today although it had been agreed in principle that an international airport be built on reclaimed island off Kuala Muda, the Government would look into various other aspects, especially cargo handling, to ensure there would be no obstacle to Penang's industrial growth.

Dr Ling said he would be briefed on the development of the airport by Kuala Lumpur based Samudera Baru Darul Aman Sdn Bhd on Tuesday.

"I will also be briefed by Malaysia Airport Berhad on what is happening in Penang, particularly on future cargo handling needs by factories operating in the State," he said.

Speaking to reporters after the handing over of the 1.9 kilometre extended runway of the Langkawi International Airport by Ekran Berhad chairman Tan Sri Ting Pek Khiing, Dr Ling said cargo handling capacity was an important aspect to be considered seriously as the Government does not want the expansion plans of factories in the State to be affected by the development of the new airport.

"We do not want the expansion plans of these factories to be affected because of lack of cargo handling facilities (at the proposed airport) because cargo facilities would have to grow with the intended industrial capacity growth.

"We do not want anything to be an obstacle to Penang's industrial growth," he added.

Dr Ling said there has not been any official objection from the State Government on the construction of the northern region international airport in Kuala Muda so far.

"Although we knew that in principle a decision had been made that the northern region international airport should be located in Kuala Muda, I have not heard of any objection.

"Within the Barisan Nasional, we can cater to the needs of everybody ... it is just a matter of adjustment," he added.

Asked on complaints by certain NGOs that the Government should locate a new international airport in the East Coast to balance the development growth between the East and West Coasts, Dr Ling said the Government would build the airport when the needs arises.

The Federal Government approved the construction of the airport, the second international airport in Kedah after Langkawi on the reclaimed land off Kuala Muda, about 140km from Alor Star on June 7. Kedah has a domestic airport - the Sultan Abdul Halim Airpot at Kepala Batas, near Alor Star.

The reclamation project involving 6,300ha was proposed by Samudera Baru and approved by the State Government in May.

In announcing the approval by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, Menteri Besar Tan Seri Sanusi Junid said the Prime Minister wanted the airport project to be expedited.

On the Langkawi airport runway extension project which cost RM315 million, Dr Ling said the extended runway would enable Boeing 747 aircraft to take off with a full load.

This would make Langkawi Airport the second to have the facility after the Sultan Abdul Aziz Airport in Subang.

Boeing 747 aircraft currently land at the airports in Penang, Johor Baru, Kota Kinablu and Kuching but could not take off full load because the runways at these airports was not long enough.

In his speech, Dr Ling said the Langkawi International Airport was only a short take-off and landing airport before it was upgraded to cater for the Airbus in 1987.

Over the years, the traffic volume at the airport increased significantly, mainly due to the staging of various international events like the Langkawi International Maritime and Aerospace Exhibition (LIMA), Langkawi International Dialogue, Langkawi International Motor Show and the Airportex 1996.

"For this year, Langkawi will host a shooting competition among Commonwealth countries, Asia Archery championship and also the International Asean Cart Prix III," he added.

The runway extension project was started in Jan 1995 and completed this year. A Boeing 747-400 aircraft with Ling and senior officials from relevant authorities landed at the Langkawi Airport for the first time to mark the completion of the extension project.

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