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Mahathir-Bridge

NORTHERN BRIDGE PROJECT ON, SAYS DR MAHATHIR

LANGKAWI, Dec 4 (Bernama) -- Malaysia will proceed with the RM10-billion land bridge project linking northern peninsular Malaysia and southern Thailand despite the ringgit's depreciation, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir said today.

The proposed project will link the southern part of the Langkawi island here to certain parts of Thailand and northern peninsular Malaysia with road, railway and gas pipeline networks.

Dr Mahathir described the proposed project as very viable in reducing congestion at the Malacca Straits.

"We plan to build a land bridge so that we don't have to go down and up the Straits of Malacca," he said.

The prime minister was speaking at dialogue with participants of the Malaysia International Maritime Conference after opening it on board the MV Star Pisces moored at the Star Cruises jetty in Tanjung Malai here.

He said the project would be carried out in cooperation with Thailand and Indonesia under the Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle (IMT-GT).

It would enable transfer of oil from a tanker off peninsular Malaysia west coast through a pipeline to a waiting tanker off the peninsular east coast for export to other parts of the world such as South Korea, China, Taiwan and Japan without passing through the Straits of Malacca, he said.

"If you just come to the south of Langkawi to harbour at a port which will be built, the oil can be transferred to the connected road, rail and pipeline to another port on the east coast," he said.

It could also be done the other way round, the prime minister said.

Dr Mahathir said part of the facilities such as railway and road networks are already in place.

He said on-going construction of the pipeline for the peninsular gas distribution project needed to complete the circuit so that the pipeline would go right along the peninsula.

At one stage it would pass through a certain part of Thailand, he said.

"We have been talking to Japanese shipping lines and they are very interested ... in fact they are also interested to participate in this project," he said.

Dr Mahathir said at its narrowest, the Straits of Malacca is only 32 km wide and some parts are quite shallow making the world's busiest waterway increasingly dangerous.

Dr Mahathir said Malaysia has to keep surveillance on the straits and spend money to clear up the mess whenever there was an oil spill.

"We want to avoid this disaster from taking place in the Straits of Malacca," he said explaining the need for the land bridge necessitated by increasing demand for oil projected in the coming years.

"The fact that our ringgit has depreciated does not mean that we cannot build this land bridge," he said.

Replying to another question during the dialogue, Dr Mahathir said there was already some synergy between development of the maritime industry and the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) as the shipping industry would see greater use and more rapid transmission of information.

The MSC is a 750-sq km zone south of Kuala Lumpur devoted to the development of multimedia services and products.

On the enforcement of the Traffic Separation Scheme in the Straits of

Malacca, he said Malaysia had installed radar along the peninsular west coast and was handling monitoring of ships.

The scheme, introduced by the International Maritime Organisation three months ago, allows for the separation of ships plying north and south of the straits.

On the shortage of maritime personnel in the country, Dr Mahathir said efforts were underway to increase their number through the setting up of more tertiary institutions and twinning programmes with foreign ones. --

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