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Penang airport won't be closed

KUALA LUMPUR, Sat. - The Bayan Lepas International Airport in Penang will be maintained as it is still needed by investors in the State.

Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today the proposed northern region international airport was not meant to serve Kedah alone but also Penang and other States in the northern region.

"It will be a Kedah-Penang airport," he told reporters after opening the Gerakan's 26th annual delegates' conference at Bangunan PGRM.

"Penang is going to be involved as there will be a road linking the island to the new airport and travel time won't be long."

Last night, Kedah Menteri Besar Tan Sri Sanusi Junid, speaking at a dinner organised by the Kedah Retired Civil Servants Association in Alor Star, said work to reclaim part of the State's coastline for the new airport is scheduled to begin in October.

Reclamation works at the 6,300ha site would be carried out in stages at the rate of four hectares per week, he said.

And yesterday, Penang Chief Minister Tan Sri Dr Koh Tsu Koon said the Bayan Lepas International Airport, built in 1935, "may or may not" be closed as there would be new uses. He said it would definitely be in operation at least for the next eight to 10 years.

Dr Mahathir said a bridge would also be built linking the new airport and industrial areas on the island.

He was earlier asked to comment on criticisms by economists that it would not make "economic sense" to build the airport as Penang and Langkawi already have international airports serving the northern region.

"Well, they (the economists) are very clever," he said. "I want to ask these economists how many countries have they run and managed. We have managed this country quite well ... we are not that stupid to build three airports in one place."

Dr Mahathir had on Thursday said that the Bayan Lepas International Airport would eventually be closed and used for "other purposes" when the new northern region international airport was built on a man-made island off Kedah's Kuala Muda coast, some 30km north east of Penang.

To a question on whether he expects the issue to be politicised, Dr Mahathir said while the Opposition would try to exploit it, the Penang people are sensible enough about this, especially investors.

Later, when met after the opening of the conference, Koh said he was happy with Dr Mahathir's assurance that the Bayan Lepas International Airport would not be closed.

Saying that the Government had always been pragmatic in its approach, he said the airport would be maintained as long as there were demands for its cargo and passenger services.

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