

15 AUG 1997

Airport

PULAU PINANG HAPPY PART OF PROPOSED NRIA TO BE BUILT IN THE STATE

PULAU PINANG, Aug 15 (Bernama) -- Pulau Pinang Chief Minister Tan Sri Dr Koh Tsu Koon said today the state government is happy that part of the proposed Northern Region International Airport (NRIA) will be built in the state.

He said that as stated by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad yesterday, the state would be involved in the project and the reclamation of the coastal areas in Kedah where the NRIA would be sited, would be extended to cover Pulau Pinang.

"Therefore, this airport would be as much as Pulau Pinang's airport as it is Kedah's airport," he told reporters here.

He was responding to Dr Mahathir's statement that the Pulau Pinang International Airport may have to close down when the NRIA is operational.

Dr Koh said that the new international airport would in fact be a joint airport for Pulau Pinang and Kedah and the entire northern region. He however declined to comment further.

He said that he met the Prime Minister two days after he returned home from his two months' leave recently and Dr Mahathir had accepted his proposal to have part of the proposed airport located in Pulau Pinang.

It would also be linked to Georgetown and Pulau Pinang island directly through a new super highway with a new bridge or an undersea tunnel, he said.

Dr Koh said via this new super highway, planned to be completed before the new airport is completed, the distance or travelling time from the proposed airport to Georgetown would be about 26 kilometres or 20 minutes and about 50 kilometres or 40 minutes to the Bayan Lepas Industrial Park.

"This will be possible because by that time, the Jelutong Expressway, the Pulau Pinang Outer Ring Road and the Butterworth Outer Ring Road will be completed to facilitate smoother and more efficient traffic flow on both the island and the mainland," he said.

According to him, the new airport which would be the second largest airport in the country, would facilitate more international flights into the region, providing greater passenger and cargo capacity and hence greater prosperity for Pulau Pinang.

He said the development of this proposed new international airport is a long-term solution for Pulau Pinang as well as the entire northern region in the context of the Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle (IMT-GT).

"Pulau Pinang will only continue to grow in the future if the entire northern region grows and the IMT-GT becomes more vibrant," he said.

Dr Koh said the construction of the new Malaysia Airports Berhad air cargo complex and the extension of the passenger terminal in the Bayan Lepas International Airport would still go on as scheduled, just as the Sultan Abdul Aziz Shah International Airport in Subang was expanded during the planning and the construction of the Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA) in Sepang.

He said the Pulau Pinang government would work closely with the federal authorities to ensure that the state would not in any way be disadvantaged but would gain from such a project and future development projects.

Meanwhile, the chairman of the northern branch of the Federation of Malaysian Manufacturers (FMM), O.K. Lee, commenting Dr Mahathir's statement on the possible closure, said that it would be "unfortunate" for Pulau Pinang if the airport is closed down.

"If the airport is to close down, it will be a loss for our members. Being the sector who serves and supports the industries here, especially in the Bayan Lepas Free Trade Zone Area, FMM members would feel the pinch because they have been enjoying the facilities at the airport for more than two centuries," he said.

As it is now, Lee said, industries in the northern region prefer to use air more than land or water passages as it is more convenient and economical to do so.

The deputy president of the Malay Chamber of Commerce, Rafique Karim, also hoped that the government would give the matter another thought.

He said Pulau Pinang still needs the airport to fulfil the need of the industries here as well as to maintain its image as a popular tourist destination.

He said the closure of the airport "will not make the island attractive anymore" as tourists will have to use another type of transportation to come to the island, which is time-consuming and expensive.

Malaysia-Indonesia-Thailand Tourist Association Bhd (MITTAS) chairman Datuk Syed Mohamad Aidid Syed Murtaza said people in Pulau Pinang should regard the new airport as the "awakening" period to them and they must prepare themselves to meet the challenges and opportunities of the next millennium.

He said they should face the decision with a new vision and strategic plan to enhance their opportunities through the construction of the new international airport.

Syed Aidid, who is also Penang Tourist Centre Sdn Bhd chairman, said the new airport will not only serve the four northern states but also contributes to the development of the IMT-GT.

"Time has come for us in the tourism industry to work together through the IMT-GT to promote the sub-region as a combined tourist destination currently promoted on a country-to-country basis," he said.

He said the tourism industry in the state would not be affected as the new airport would further promote the island as a popular tourist destination besides other places including Langkawi and Pangkor.

National Wanita Gerakan deputy chief Rhina Bhar said the government should reveal what plans they have for the Bayan Lepas Airport and what measures are being taken to alleviate the congestion problems.

She claimed that the RM100 million allocation to upgrade the airport here, as announced by Transport Minister Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik recently, was insufficient for the expansion project.

She said while the new airport was being built, the congestion at the airport here would continue to persist, a problem which she said could not even be solved even with the RM100 million allocation. -- BERNAMA

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