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Bridge to the future (HL)

Ravi Nambiar

JOHOR BARU, Sat. - Malaysia and Singapore vowed to improve bilateral ties and pledged to step up co-operation, especially to overcome the region's economic problems, as they formally opened their second road link today.

Prime Ministers Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Goh Chok Tong, in their speeches, stressed the need for closer collaboration during the regional economic downturn and the importance of close bilateral relations.

Following the multi-religious blessing at the opening ceremony of the 1.9-km bridge over the Johor Straits, the two leaders hailed the "friendly relationship" and "close co-ordination and co-operation" they shared.

"Despite the recent hiccup in relations, I am very heartened to note that the economic turmoil that is affecting the region has, in fact, brought us closer together," Dr Mahathir said.

Goh said: "The Second Link is not just another great engineering feat. It is a symbol of a new phase in Malaysia-Singapore relations."

They said the project - the culmination of three years' collaboration between the private sectors of both countries - would not only serve to strengthen ties but also serve as the "bridge" to carry both countries into the 21st century.

"Malaysia values its links with Singapore and has always regarded Singaporeans as friends," said Dr Mahathir.

"I look forward with great optimism and confidence to even closer co-operation between us," he said.

Goh said the opening of the Second Link during this period of regional economic turbulence showed that co-operation was the way to go.

"The construction itself is testimony to the achievements that we can attain by putting our hearts and minds together," he said.

The two leaders also signed a plaque and cut a ribbon to mark the official opening in a ceremony held on the bridge overlooking the Singapore skyline.

The ceremony was witnessed by over 2,000 guests, including Dr Mahathir's wife Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali, Works Minister Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu, Foreign Minister Datuk Abdullah Badawi, Defence Minister Datuk Syed Hamid Albar, Youth and Sports Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, Information Minister Datuk Mohamad Rahmat and Johor Menteri Besar Datuk Abdul Ghani Othman.

The Singaporeans included Mrs Goh, National Development Minister Lim Hng Kiang, Foreign Minister Prof S. Jayakumar and Communications Minister Mah Bow Tan.

Spanning nearly 2km, the Second Link was opened to traffic on Jan 2 this year and took nine years to materialise.

Construction only started in March 1994 and Linkedua (M) Bhd, the developer and concessionaire, built the 1.7km Malaysian portion at a cost of RM363 million.

Singapore spent S\$800 million (RM1.9 billion) on the remaining 0.2km portion of the bridge and related facilities.

Dr Mahathir said Singapore was Malaysia's leading Asean trading partner and the new bridge would go a long way toward enhancing that partnership.

"I am confident it will play a pivotal role in facilitating economic and infrastructure development in Singapore and Malaysia. Indeed, I can say it will literally act as the bridge to carry our two countries into the 21st

century," he said.

Dr Mahathir said the bridge was also a triumph for Asean as it was a testimony of successful regional co-operation.

The Second Link, he said, was a new and important bridge in the national and regional highway system and would serve as a catalyst for development by virtue of its extension to Singapore.

"It will help open up new growth areas around Johor Baru and towns further north, and facilitate the relocation of selected industries within the region."

Referring to recent "hiccups" in bilateral relations following Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew's remarks about Johor and the raising of the re-merger issue by Singapore leaders, Dr Mahathir said:

"Frequent consultations have made us more aware of sensitivities and the problems we face.

"Of greater importance is the fact that it has made us more aware of the strengths that both possess and how these can be harnessed for the benefit of our peoples."

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