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## Call for an integrated national ocean policy

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MALAYSIA needs a comprehensive and coordinated national ocean policy for a more integrated approach towards ocean management and governance. The policy will also coordinate policy outputs, enforcement and other related activities for better utilisation of scarce natural resources.

The integrated ocean policy will, among others, address the structural weaknesses in the sector by sector approach to ocean management, which is currently being practised.

Transport Minister Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik said the national ocean policy is urgently needed.

"A better coordinated ocean policy will help the Government address the deficit in the service account in our balance of payment where a large portion of the RM9.6 billion deficit in the service sector of the balance of payment in 1997 was the result of the high import of shipping services," he said at the opening of a two day conference on Ocean Governance in Kuala Lumpur yesterday.

A sector approach is too restrictive as it treats the ocean in isolation or separately from the terrestrial, when in actual fact, the ocean and land mass should be developed together as an integrated unit to produce an effective ocean management policy.

To achieve this, Business Times understands that a National Ocean Policy Council, to be chaired by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, will be established soon. The Maritime Institute of Malaysia (Mima) had sent a proposal on the council to the Transport Ministry two years ago.

Dr Ling said the national ocean policy will provide a policy tool in the promotion of ecologically sustainable development of Malaysia's ocean resources, both for wealth creation and environmental protection.

Due to the complexity of the ocean and its multiple purposes, no single Government let alone an agency on its own can undertake to manage it.

"This shared responsibility for sustaining the vitality of the resources at sea should become the basis for a mutual, rather than competitive, management system. We need to find cooperative mechanisms which can override traditional concepts of sovereignty and control the ocean for a common purpose," he said.

The minister said a national policy will also overcome inconsistencies among federal, state and local agencies in exercising regulatory jurisdictions over marine activities.

Currently, he said, Malaysia is party to more than 10 international maritime treaties including the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Laws of the Sea.

"It is difficult to imagine how a nation can hope to honour all these obligations under these treaties without effective coordination. This is yet another consideration for a national ocean policy."

Mima director-general Dr BA Hamzah told Business Times the environment, shipping, port and maritime transport sectors are treated as separate policies, when in fact there must be a system to integrate the coastal zone with the sea.

"Ocean industries have become important sources of foreign exchange for the nation. Shipping, oil and gas, for example, contributed 13 per cent to the gross domestic product of Malaysia, when in fact, we believe the ratio, if proper accounting of the maritime sector is undertaken, is closer to 20 per cent now."

Hamzah added that if the productivity of the ocean sector can be increased, it will certainly minimise the impact of the current economic uncertainty. "Likewise, if we can attract new investments in the ocean sector, this would also make a positive impact."

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