

27 JUN 1998

Mahathir-Airport

KL INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT CAN HELP NATION'S RECOVERY

KUALA LUMPUR, June 27 (Bernama) -- Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said the new KL International Airport (KLIA) is not extravagant but a timely and cheap project that may even help to restore the country's economy.

"If we had not made a decision to build this airport long before the depreciation of the ringgit, we would have to pay at least two times as much.

"Certainly with our present economic situation we would not build it at all. But we decided at the right time and at RM9 billion this is the cheapest major airport," he said in his speech at the official opening of the airport which was televised live by RTM tonight.

The airport was officially opened by the Yang di-Pertuan Agong Tuanku Ja'afar.

The Prime Minister said many people believed the KLIA was one of the mega projects which had contributed to Malaysia's economic problems today.

He said the airport was obviously a mega project when the size of its land (10,000 hectares) was considered, but in terms of costs it was extremely cheap compared to similar airports now being commissioned.

"In terms of cost, it is not mega at all. It is easily the most economic project in the world. Far from being the cause of our economic downturn, it is likely to help our recovery," he said.

As a comparison, the new Hong Kong airport was built at a cost of US\$9 billion (about RM35 billion) minus its road and bridge, he said.

Describing the official opening of the KLIA as another milestone in Malaysia's aviation history, Dr Mahathir said that during the present economic slowdown it offered the aviation industry in the Asia-Pacific region unlimited capacity for growth.

"A hub can only succeed if it could offer a wide network of connecting flights," he said.

The KLIA should achieve this by promoting itself with confidence, and ensure that the airport charges remained attractive, he said.

The government would strive to draw new airline companies to the KLIA, and would use existing investment incentives to attract suitable and strategic industries to areas surrounding the airport, said Dr Mahathir.

The airport was expected to provide job opportunities to 30,000 people, he said.

The Prime Minister hoped Malaysians would not join in the criticism of the airport by foreigners.

"The KLIA is owned by Malaysians and it is we who will be using it more than others. Make full use of the KLIA.

"Point out if there is something that's not right and we will try to rectify it together," he said.

Dr Mahathir said the KLIA was also proof of Malaysians' capability to build a world class airport with futuristic technology, without destroying the environment.

"Completing a project as large as this in a period of not even five years is proof of our ability.

"To my knowledge, no airport as big as this has been built within a short period and with a small financial allocation," he said.

Dr Mahathir said it was also significant that the KLIA was built under full Malaysian management.

The airport, completed in four and a half years as a "fast track

project", was undertaken by KL International Airport Bhd (KLIAB), which is wholly owned by the government.

Dr Mahathir said initially the government wanted to have foreign prime contractors and construction management after being told that the construction of an airport as big as KLIA would be very difficult and needed management of a very high calibre.

"But due to a slight mishap, we decided not to entrust the construction management to foreigners. Instead, we appointed a very ordinary Public Works engineer who had never built anything like this before to manage the construction," he said.

The Prime Minister congratulated the Malaysian engineers, contractors, construction managers and architects and others for their contribution towards the building of the airport which involved 25,000 workers, mostly foreign, and hundreds of contracts.

He also had a surprise for KLIAB managing director Datuk Ir Jamilus Hussein whom he described as "certainly the man most responsible for the management of the construction of this very complex project".

Dr Mahathir announced that Jamilus, who was seconded from the Public Works Department, had been awarded the Panglima Setia Mahkota which carries the title "Tan Sri" in conjunction with the Yang di-Pertua Agong's recent 76th birthday.

Dr Mahathir also stressed the need for the greenery around the airport must be preserved.

"KLIA is not just an airport. It is a piece of art, dedicated to beauty as well as the environment. It relates to the greenness and the forests of Malaysia, both inside and outside," he said.

The airport's theme of "airport in the forest, forest in the airport" would become more evident after the landscaping was fully completed.

Dr Mahathir also acknowledged Japanese architect Kisho Kurokawa who designed the airport.

"The design of the airport is his largely but the specs are Malaysian. Much of the design concept is Malaysian. Interior design are mostly to Malaysian taste, done by Malaysians and largely of Malaysian manufacture," Dr Mahathir said.

The KLIA, which will take over as the main gateway into Malaysia from the Sultan Abdul Aziz Shah (SAAS) airport on Tuesday, has a capacity that is six to seven times larger than the latter which handled 16 million passengers last year.

The SAAS airport was built 33 years ago for 400,000 passengers a year and after three terminals, it did not have the room for further expansion.

The KLIA will initially handle 25 million passengers a year and will ultimately have the capacity for 100 million passengers under future phases of development.

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