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LEAD Crossing-Opening

MALAYSIA AND SINGAPORE HAVE BECOME CLOSER DUE TO FINANCIAL CRISIS

JOHOR BAHRU, April 18 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and his Singapore counterpart Goh Chok Tong today officially opened the second crossing between the countries with both leaders declaring that bilateral ties had strengthened in the wake of the regional financial crisis.

The two prime ministers signed a commemorative plaque and jointly cut a ribbon at the mid-point of the two-kilometre bridge called the Malaysia-Singapore Second Crossing that links Tanjung Kupang in Johor and Tuas in Singapore.

Dr Mahathir said the economic turmoil affecting the Asean region has brought Malaysia and Singapore closer despite the recent hiccup in relations between the two countries.

"I am very heartened to note that the economic turmoil that is affecting the Asean region had, in fact, brought us closer together to resolve the problems besetting us," said Dr Mahathir.

Dr Mahathir said the second link would certainly enhance the partnership between the two countries as well as play a pivotal role in facilitating the economies and infrastructure development of both Singapore and Malaysia.

"Indeed, I can say that this second crossing will literally act as the bridge to carry our two countries into the 21st century," said Dr Mahathir.

Goh hailed the link as "a bridge to the future" that would open up new areas for collaboration between the private sectors from both sides.

The Singapore Premier backed Dr Mahathir's philosophy that the two countries would work towards realising the full potential of bilateral relations based on the principle of "prosper thy neighbour".

Goh said the commitment by the two countries to cooperate was all the more important during "these difficult times where financial turbulence has buffeted the region."

Referring to the depreciation of currencies and the drop in confidence in the region's economies, Goh said: "These shared pains show how interlink our destiny is but the regional crisis has also made us work even closer together. As a result, we will emerge stronger from our tribulations."

Goh said Singapore and Malaysia have much in common and much to gain from working together although the regional economic crisis had made their strides towards the new millenium a bit more tentative.

He said the second crossing would play a significant part to facilitate the expansion of bilateral trade and investment now that Melaka, Negeri Sembilan and Pahang have joined the Indonesia-Malaysia-Singapore Growth Triangle.

Dr Mahathir said frequent consultations and discussions between the two countries, especially on ways to resolve the economic turmoil had made Malaysia and Singapore more aware of the sensitivity and the problems faced by the two nations.

He also reiterated that Malaysia valued its links with Singapore and "has always regarded Singapore and Singaporean as friends."

"Of more importance is the fact that it has made us more aware of the strength that both possess and how this can be harnessed for the benefit of our people," he said.

"I therefore look forward with great optimism and confident to even closer cooperation between us," he said.

He also said that the bridge which took three years to construct was a triumph for Asean as it demonstrated the success of two of its members in working towards regional cooperation.

"For Malaysia, the second crossing will provide new and important links in the national and regional highways system and will enable it to act as a catalyst in the development of an area which is very close to the consumer market and supporting facilities of Singapore.

"It will also help to open up new growth areas around Johor Baharu and towns further north and in the process will facilitate the relocation of selected industries within the region," said the Prime Minister.

Also present at the ceremony were Johor Menteri Besar Datuk Abdul Ghani Othman, Works Minister Datuk Seri S.Samy Vellu, Information Minister Datuk Seri Mohamed Rahmat, Defence Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar and Youth and Sports Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin.

Singapore Ministers who attended the event were Minister for National Development Lim Hng Kiang, Minister for Foreign Affairs and Law Prof S.Jayakumar and Minister for Communications Mah Bow Tan.

Singapore built 0.3km of the crossing at a cost of S\$600 million while Malaysia built the rest including a six-lane highway linking the bridge to to the North-South Highway at a cost of RM1.2 billion.

The second link was opened to traffic on Jan 2 and toll charges were imposed on March 17. -- BERNAMA

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