

13/08/1998

PM to chair panel to promote P. Klang (HL)

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IN stepping up a gear the promotion of Port Klang as the national load centre, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has agreed to chair a special committee to spearhead the campaign.

The committee will comprise representatives from the ministries of Transport and International Trade and Industry, port authorities, the Selangor Government, freight forwarders, hauliers, importers and exporters, chambers of commerce and other relevant bodies.

It will ensure that every single link in the transport chain play a role in promoting Port Klang as a national and regional load centre.

The Cabinet, Transport Minister Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik said, feels that the responsibility should not be shouldered by only the Transport Ministry and port operators.

"It should be a total national effort," Dr Ling told reporters in Kuala Lumpur yesterday after attending the weekly Cabinet meeting.

Dr Mahathir and Dr Ling had in recent weeks stressed the need for the industry players to consolidate efforts to promote the port, both locally and regionally.

Dr Ling said the Prime Minister has agreed to chair the special committee which is aimed at outlining plans and strategies to ensure success of the campaign.

It is not immediately known when the committee will hold its first meeting.

The ministry will monitor responses from local importers and exporters to the Government's call to use local ports. "We (the Transport Ministry) will do this all the time and port operators are to keep tabs on the number of vessels calling at their respective ports."

He reiterated the importance and urgency of transforming Port Klang into the national load centre in view of the fast-changing shipping patterns among major lines throughout the world.

Shipping companies, he said, are conglomerating into a few giant companies and their vessels are also becoming larger.

"As a result, they would in the future only call at ports where there is a lot of cargo. Making Port Klang as a load centre will ensure that these main line vessels continue to come here."

One such main line vessel which will be calling at West Port is the 6,000-TEU (20-ft equivalent units) Danish container ship, Regina Maersk. It is making its maiden call at the port on August 24.

"At the end of the day, the country will benefit from this (main line calls) as it opens up a whole new area of growth in terms of ship bunkering, ship handling, ship repair, ship-building, shipping insurance and banking," he said.

Due to the present economic situation, Dr Ling said, Port Klang's throughput is expected to drop this year.

Last year, Port Klang handled 1.7 million TEUs, an increase of 19.5 per cent from 1996.

He attributed the anticipated drop to a lower import volume, which would most likely fall further given the ringgit's weakness.

"Nonetheless, we expect this drop to be offset by the country's rising exports and transshipment cargo. In fact, transshipment cargo has increased by about 30-40 per cent in the first few months of this year compared with the year-ago period," he added.

At present, Malaysian ports handle about three million TEUs (20-foot equivalent units) a year, 1.7 million TEUs of which go through Port Klang. Another 1.2 million TEUs go through the Singapore port.

"In fact, if we can get back some one million TEUs from Singapore, we may not feel the decline," he said.

Dr Ling said with total national effort, he hopes Port Klang's throughput will increase as users become more aware of the benefits of using local ports to ship their goods.

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