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Second Link toll rates to remain

Thanam Visvanathan

JOHOR BARU, Sat. - Toll rates on the Malaysia-Singapore Second Link will not be reduced any further, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamed said.

"The present rates are already lower than those initially set," he told reporters after the official opening of the Second Link here today. "So I do not think there is a need to reduce it any more."

His statement ends intense speculation that the toll rates would be revised downwards in view of the protests from the business community, in particular transport operators.

The initial proposal set rates at RM8 for cars, RM21 for buses and vans, and RM53 for lorries.

In late February, the Cabinet agreed to a reduction, and when the final rates were officially announced on March 4, they were reduced by about half - RM4.80 for cars, RM11.40 for vans and small lorries, RM25.50 for lorries, RM4.10 for taxis and RM6.20 for buses.

Still, transport operators and the Johor Chinese Chamber of Commerce claimed the charges, especially for lorries, remained unacceptably high, and lobbied for a further revision of the toll.

Dr Mahathir said he did not see the need for a campaign to promote the use of the Second Link despite it being generally under-utilised.

"The same thing happened when the Penang Bridge and the North-South Highway were opened. Soon, drivers discovered that it was much more economical to use the new bridge and highway.

"Similarly, I am sure people will change their minds in time, and use the Second Link on their own accord."

Asked if the existing Johor Causeway would be replaced with a new bridge, Dr Mahathir said a Malaysian private company had proposed to demolish the Causeway, replacing it with a wide, modern bridge that would allow for the passage of small boats and vessels underneath it.

However, he said the proposal would be more actively considered when times were better.

On the the new Malaysia-Singapore water agreement, Dr Mahathir said it was in its final stages and certain "formalities" were being seen through.

Dr Mahathir also defended the Government's move to inject capital into certain ailing companies, to save them from bankruptcy.

"We cannot allow a project to just go under, simply because a country's finances have been undermined by the currency crisis," he said.

"It is not the company's fault, or purely due to bad management. Any company will suffer when the country's currency is devalued, and share prices are depressed."

Dr Mahathir said the injection of capital into such companies was necessary to ensure their survival, so that they may carry through projects that have been entrusted to them.

"It is for the benefit of the country, because if we simply allow these companies to go bankrupt we would not be able to collect taxes from them," he said.

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