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Mahathir-Airports

AIRPORTS SHOULD DETERMINE OWN DESTINY - DR M

KUALA LUMPUR, July 18 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said airports should play a more direct role in determining their destiny.

Urging Airport Council International (ACI) to help guide airports in this matter, he said previously airlines took the lead in marketing airports.

"I am pleased to note that airports are already more directly involved in air services negotiations, and determining aircraft schedule and slot times, thus enabling them to market directly their facilities and services.

"These are positive developments and indicate that airports have come of age without losing their concerns for safety and efficient operations of aircrafts," he said at the 9th ACI Pacific Regional Assembly and Conference dinner here tonight.

Dr Mahathir said that in many instances, airports had become an integral part of major urban and sub-urban centres and must perform all these diverse functions while maintaining their primary responsibility to receive and despatch aircrafts efficiently and safely.

"When we build an airport we are really building a city with sophisticated urban functions all under, figuratively speaking, one big roof," he said.

Dr Mahathir said many studies and papers had been presented by ACI and bodies such as Air Transport Action Group (ATAG) on increasing the awareness of the community as to the benefits that an airport brought, both socially and economically, to the community and nation.

He said figures quoted in those studies on employment, investment opportunities and business growth, and the multiplier effect on the economy as a whole, were helpful to change the negative perceptions people had on airport expenditure.

The prime minister said Sultan Abdul Aziz Shah airport in Subang was regarded by some as a white elephant when it was built but what happened was that it helped spur massive developments of its neighbourhood.

Noting that the KL International Airport's (KLIA) construction was also deemed an extravagance by some people, he said it would rapidly prove that such projects were necessary for a country's long term growth and prosperity.

Impact studies in areas related to construction of airports should be continued by organisations such as ACI, he said.

On the economic downturn that hit the region in the third quarter of 1997,

Dr Mahathir said although airports were generally resilient to economic downturns than airlines, the slowdown that hit the region in late 1997 affected airports there.

"As with many other airports in this region, Malaysian airports too experienced declines in traffic last year, though we seem to be improving this year," he added.

Observing that airports had become more transnational and global, Dr Mahathir said the time might have come for them to adopt the hotel star ratings.

"Focus on service quality level improvement should be the rule of the game for airports for the future. Over and above that, airports are now required to play a more enhanced role in trade, industry, social and

cultural promotion and exchanges," he said.

Dr Mahathir commended KLIA Berhad because KLIA was ranked third in the world by the International Air Transportation Association (IATA) for passenger satisfaction and the company was nominated for excellence in engineering work.

"These are remarkable achievements by a developing country in such a short space of time," he said.

The prime minister said although there were hitches during the first two weeks of KLIA operations, these were overcome sooner than usual.

He said the success of the development of KLIA went beyond the physical construction of the airport.

"The implementation of a deliberate transfer of technology programme has enabled local companies to keep abreast with the major players in the airport industry," he added.

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