

03 OCT 1999

Mahathir-Roads

DEVELOPING COUNTRIES NEED TO ENHANCE CONSTRUCTION PROJECTS, SAYS PM

KUALA LUMPUR, Oct 3 (Bernama) -- Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today that developing countries need to enhance construction projects and programmes so as to enable greater participation of the rural folk in socio-economic development.

The prime minister said roads and other models of transportation represented the key to enhance quality of life.

As for road engineers, they should concentrate on identifying technology that could extend the service life of road infrastructure in the wake of limited financial resources, he said in his speech at the opening of the seven-day XXI World Road Congress, here.

The text of his speech was read out by Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

Dr Mahathir said a transport policy need to strike a balance between three key issues -- the environment, the economy and users preferences.

As for developed countries, he said, they believed that a change in emphasis was needed to recognise the long-term consequences of high road-traffic growth.

He said for the developed countries the era of constructing and undertaking big highway projects had ended and the new thinking and trend was to manage what they have, instead of building more.

It must be recognised that construction of roads on its own must not be taken in isolation, he said, adding that more than not, the road was not the only investment needed and as such, complementary investments were equally important to bring about the desired impact.

He said the dilemma facing many developing countries was to balance development and environment.

He said construction of roads especially new roads would directly and indirectly create environmental effect but in Malaysia sustainable development with the impending emphasis on the protection of the environment had been given priority.

Dr Mahathir said although the world subscribes to various environmental declaration including the 1992 Rio summit where the "rich" would contribute to the poor to prevent those countries from cutting trees for development, the contribution from the rich was not forthcoming.

"Yet they relentlessly condemn those who have little choice but to exploit their few natural resources," he said.

In Malaysia, he said, adequate measures were taken to minimise environmental damage in major development projects including road construction and one example was the on-going second east-west highway where about 5 per cent of the total cost of the project had been dedicated to environmental protection work.

He said roads represented a huge accumulated investment of the nation which must be preserved and maintained carefully for future generations.

"The philosophy of good maintenance must be revisited and the notion that prevention is to take priority over repair must be given due consideration," he said, adding that it should be emphasised that money spent on maintenance should be treated as an investment.

Hence, there was a need to introduce the concept of the life-cycle costing before making decisions about maintenance expenditure, he said.

For this, he said, maintenance management systems would be required to enable a rational formulation of standards and intervention levels.

Dr Mahathir said road accidents resulting in death and injuries had become a major issue as a result of improvements in the road system and the situation was especially bad in developing countries where it had been estimated that 350,000 people die in road accidents a year.

He said in Malaysia, road accidents had become a major concern and statistics revealed an increase in the number of deaths from 4,048 deaths in 1990 to 6,302 deaths in 1997, costing losses of RM6 billion each year.

However, the prime minister was happy that there was a slight reduction in the total number of road accident cases last year.

He also appreciated the World Road Association's important role to improve international technical cooperation and fostering progress in road engineering.

Malaysia has over 16,000 kms of federal roads and some 50,000 kms of state roads and the road network has steadily been increasing at a rate of about 10 per cent per annum.

-- BERNAMA

ARA RM