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## Expand use of airport facilities, PM urges operators

WITH airports becoming more transnational and global, specialists and managers of these gateways should now look beyond expanding their primary functions of receiving and despatching aircraft.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said airports are now required to play a more enhanced role in trade, industry, social and cultural promotion and exchanges.

"In many instances, airports have become an integral part of major urban and sub-urban centres.

"They must perform all these diverse functions, while maintaining their primary responsibility to receive and despatch aircraft efficiently and safely," he said at the launching of the four-day Ninth Airport Council International (ACI) Pacific Regional Assembly and Conference in Kuala Lumpur yesterday.

Since the airport operators are managing transnational communities, he said the airport is no longer simply a space for landing, boarding and taking off.

"Seamless travel is now becoming more of a reality. Superior customer service, comfort and ambience used to be the domain of hotels and airlines.

"More and more airports now are being transformed and uplifted to provide equally high levels of service and comfort. Probably, the time has come for airports to adopt the hotel star classification; five star, four star, three-star and so on," he said.

As such, he said focus on service quality improvement should be the rule of the game for airports of the future.

"Now, it is up to airport specialists to expand the use of airport facilities beyond the immediate travellers," he said.

While airports are already playing a significant role in tourism by being gateways to tourists and projecting a nation's first impression to visitors, he said they can also become leisure destinations in themselves.

"Having been built as a major transport infrastructure, an airport can be easily transformed from a mere transit point to a centre for all kinds of businesses and activities related to air transport needs," he said.

For example, Dr Mahathir said, the new KL International Airport in Sepang (KLIA) has already embarked on the diversification of its role. He cited the Sepang Gateway Recreation Park, with facilities such as F-1 Motor Sports circuit, Go-Kart circuit, golf course and wetland recreational facilities as examples.

Dr Mahathir also praised and congratulated KLIA for its recent achievements such as receiving international recognition, which he said the airport rightly deserves.

"KLIA just completed its first year of operations last month. I am told that the airport has been ranked third in the world by the International Air Transport Association for business passenger satisfaction.

"The developer of the airport, KLIA Bhd, has also been nominated for excellence in engineering work.

"These are remarkable achievements earned by a developing country in such a short space of time," he said, while maintaining that the airport's construction is not an extravagance as such projects are needed for a country's long term growth and prosperity.

Dr Mahathir also noted the rapid growth in the country's civil aviation,

which started in Malaysia in the early forties.

"Malaysia is relatively young in the provision of air transport and aviation services. However, we have grown faster than we expected.

"Today, we have a network of five international airports, 15 domestic airports and 18 other small airports," he said.

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