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Govt to defer building new toll roads

GIVEN that the Malaysian public "is still not ready for quality roads," Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said the Government will postpone the construction of new toll roads by private companies until the public is ready to pay for better roads.

"New roads will not be built until road users are prepared to pay toll or better price for it," said Dr Mahathir at a press conference yesterday. Following this, Dr Mahathir said "quite a number" of private toll road projects including East Cost Expressway, that have not yet begun work will be deferred until there is a demand.

"But I am convinced that by the time they (public) realise they need these roads, the cost would have escalated as well as the toll rates, although subsidised by Government, will also have increased substantially."

However, the Government, on its part, will continue to build roads and highways based on its own capability and availability of funds. He nevertheless reminded that the number of cars on the road is growing rapidly and any delay in building roads will lead to higher costs, hence require higher toll payment.

On the contrary, if the roads are built earlier, then the cost is naturally lower and the toll imposed is also lower. And it is for this reason that the Government has undertaken to privatize these road projects to enable the roads to be built at the lowest cost possible at the earliest time.

"But if we wait after this time to build the road, then we may have to fork out a lot more and where there is toll, it would also be a lot higher," he said.

He cited the example of the first highway that was built in the country which is the 42 km four-lane highway spanning from Kuala Lumpur-Seremban which cost RM42 million to build then.

Recently, it took the company twice the amount to merely widen the road partially. In addition, if the same highway is to be built today, it would cost at least RM150 million-RM200 million.

Responding to a question on whether the contractual agreements between the concessionaire and the Government should be made public, Dr Mahathir replied that this should not be a problem.

He hoped however, that once the public read the contract, they will not be hesitant to pay for the increases in the toll fares as stipulated in the agreement.

At the press conference, Dr Mahathir spoke extensively about why the public should be willing to pay the toll for quality roads which ultimately enables them to save fuel cost, time as well as their lives. He said the Government could impose other taxes such as petroleum or vehicle tax on road users as carried out in other countries to get funds to build highways but this would not be fair as this means those who do not use certain roads would still have to pay for those who do.

In addition, the tolled roads are of better quality than the ordinary roads but better quality also means higher cost. He said it costs about RM25 million per km to build.

In addition, these highways provide about four to six lanes and are built straight or with "soft bends" which make it safer and more comfortable and are also equipped with resting facilities.

To prove that the tolled roads are safer than ordinary roads, he said the ratio of accidents on these roads were about 1:10. Furthermore, toll roads have enabled road users to lessen the journey to their destination by almost half and this means road users save on fuel consumption as well as the wear and tear on their vehicle.

"As such, although it seems as if the road users need to pay more, the payment is actually coming from the money saved from less fuel consumption. It looks like we have to pay a lot but actually not much," he continued.

Dr Mahathir also said that the toll rates in Malaysia is one of the lowest given the Government's role in subsidising the fares.

"No other country has the same quality of roads with such low toll rates," he continued.

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