

29/01/1999

20 highway projects put off

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KUALA LUMPUR, Thurs. - The Government will defer the construction of more than 20 new highways following criticisms against toll increases.

Works Minister Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu said the new highways were the ones approved by the Cabinet but had not taken off the ground.

"For those on which work has started, they will have to proceed until completion," he said citing the Ampang-Kuala Lumpur elevated highway, Sprint Highway, East Coast Highway and the North-Klang Straits By-pass as examples.

He was speaking after meeting DAP Members of Parliament and State Assemblymen at his office over toll increases today.

The Opposition leaders were DAP secretary-general Lim Kit Siang, Kepong MP Dr Tan Seng Giaw, Cheras MP Tan Kok Wai, Bukit Gasing State Assemblyman Teng Chang Khim and Damansara Utama State Assemblywoman Dr Oon Hong Geok.

Yesterday, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said the Government would stop building new highways until the people were willing to pay toll.

Mahathir said the Government had to do this because it could not afford to build quality highways and had to privatise such projects which would lead to the imposition of toll.

On the two-hour closed door meeting, Samy Vellu said he would bring DAP's proposal for the setting up of a highway consultative council to the Cabinet for discussion.

Lim said the council would function as a forum for the public to voice their grouses over current and future highway operations and constructions.

On the DAP's request for the Government to make public the content of highway concession agreements, Samy Vellu said some had been revealed through the media.

"The Government, however, cannot reveal everything especially new projects before the land acquisition exercise as affected landowners will increase the price of land," he said.

Lim also said that the DAP would be meeting PLUS top officials at its headquarters tomorrow.

Earlier, after chairing the MIC central working committee meeting, Samy Vellu who is also MIC president, said the Government's decision not to carry out future highway projects until the people were willing to pay toll, was right.

"I hope non-governmental organisations and political parties who had voiced their dissatisfaction recently are now satisfied with the Government's decision.

"We hope they will be happy to continue using the old roads," he added.

The Malaysian Youth Council urged the Government to review its decision to defer all new highway projects to be built through privatisation.

Its Urban Development Committee head Norizan Sharif said the deferment of highway projects would affect the country's economic activities and development as a whole.

"The question of paying toll does not arise because the people are willing to pay, and the only problem here is that the toll rate imposed is too high," he told Bernama here.

In Penang, Chief Minister Tan Sri Dr Koh Tsu Koon called for a major review in the system of implementing major highways.

He said as the nation became more affluent and aware of quality of time, they would view the issue differently.

"Psychologically and politically, however, the issue of a toll hike is bound to invoke objections during this time of economic difficulties," he told a Press conference at his office.

When asked if a toll increase was expected soon for users of the Penang Bridge, Koh said the reprieve he obtained from the Federal authorities and bridge concessionaire Penang Bridge Sdn Bhd last year was for an "unspecified period."

"There was no need to increase toll charges on the bridge owing to toll collection which had increased due to the number of vehicles crossing the bridge," he said, adding the 13.5km bridge was the only segment of the North-South Expressway where toll increases of two per cent were carried out once every five years.

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