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Mahathir-expressway

LDP EXPRESSWAY TOLL REDUCED TO RM1

KUALA LUMPUR, Jan 27 (Bernama) -- Toll for private cars using the Damansara-Puchong (LDP) expressway is reduced from RM1.50 to RM1 effective after the Chinese New Year, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad announced today.

He also announced that toll rate for the North-South Expressway (NSE) would be raised by 0.75 sen a kilometre effective from the same date and this meant that users would be paying 11.25 sen a km for use of the NSE henceforth.

Dr Mahathir said the LDP toll reduction would see the government paying RM85 million a year to the concession company, Lingkaran Trans Kota Sdn Bhd to make up for the company's losses.

The government had also decided to defer construction of new expressways by the private sector as Malaysians were not yet ready to pay toll to use quality roads, he said.

"New roads will not be built until users are ready to use tolled roads," he said at a news conference at the Prime Minister's Department to clarify the expressway toll issue.

Dr Mahathir, who spoke at length on the need for the government to privatise construction of the country's roads, said he had to intervene in the issue as there was a boiling sentiment suggesting that a general election was imminent and that the governing Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition would lose power if expressway toll was not reduced.

"We accept that in a democracy, we are subject to threats ... when the government is threatened it will act in a populist way and we'll do something at the expense of the country," he said.

Dr Mahathir said by deciding to reduce the LDP toll the government would have to cut down by RM85 million allocations for other projects so as to compensate the LDP concession company.

He said postponing construction of new tolled highways would also affect the proposed east coast expressway.

Malaysians should understand the government's objective of providing quality, safe and cost-effective roads by privatising construction of highways, he said.

Accident figures showed that the country's tolled highways were comparatively safer for users than ordinary trunk roads.

For a fee, users of tolled highways were also saving costs in terms of shorter travel time as longer travel time would mean more in terms of fuel and maintenance costs for their vehicles, he said.

He said the government could not afford to build quality expressways because of their exorbitant costs and it would take much longer time to get the funds ready before it could even start building them.

"If the government were to wait until it has enough money to build highways, chances are we'll never be able to use decent highways," he said.

Dr Mahathir said the government chose not to raise specific taxes on vehicles and petroleum to get the funds to build highways because not all traffic would use them.

"It is unfair for highway users to depend on taxes levied on ordinary road users," he said.

He said some countries like the United States collected five sen a gallon (4.5 litres) as petroleum tax to get funds to build their expressways and if Malaysia were to adopt a similar approach, non-road

users would also have to pay.

"That's why we've decided on building tolled highways and because users would have to pay toll the roads built would have to be of a better standard than ordinary roads," he said.

He said straight six-lane dual carriage tolled expressways not only provided added comfort for traffic but were equipped with various facilities such as rest areas.

The better road system provided by tolled highways had contributed to less accidents and fatalities, he said.

"When we use tolled roads, we save lives," he said.

Dr Mahathir said users of tolled highways were actually paying out of their savings on less fuel consumption and less "wear and tear" of their vehicles.

"It looks like we have to pay much but the savings are a lot besides saving lives," he said.

He appealed to the press to make comparisons between accidents on tolled highways and ordinary roads.

"I'm very worried about the number of deaths and accidents," he said.

He also suggested that the press and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) take a look at tolled roads in developing countries and compare them with the quality of Malaysia's tolled highways.

"If there are other developing countries with roads as good as Malaysia's, please report about them and I'll award prizes," he said.

On Malaysians not being ready to pay to use quality roads, Dr Mahathir said putting on hold new tolled highway projects would see their costs soaring further in future.

"By building the highways earlier, their toll will also be lower, if we wait 10, 15 years more to build them, they would be costlier," he said.

As an example Dr Mahathir cited the 40 km-long Kuala Lumpur-Seremban Highway which had cost only RM42 million to build.

But the cost of upgrading sections of the highway later almost doubled the original cost, he said.

Cost-saving was one of the reasons behind the government's decision to privatise road construction in the country, he said.

Malaysia's highway toll rates were still the cheapest compared to those levied in other countries, he said.

In Japan for example, he added, road users had to pay RM1 a km whereas in Malaysia, the rate was about 11 sen per km.

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