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People must be willing to pay tolls, says PM

Lokman Mansor

THE Government will only reconsider the construction of new highways when the people are willing to pay its toll, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said.

"We need to know whether consumers are willing to pay the toll or not. Building a highway involves large expenditure. We do not want a situation where the highway is ready and people do not want to pay," he said.

Speaking to reporters at the Kuala Lumpur International Airport in Sepang on his return from the World Economic Forum in Switzerland, Dr Mahathir said the Government itself does not have enough money to build the highways in the same time it takes the private sector.

"If consumers do not want to pay (the toll) then it will take a long time (to build the highways) until the Government has enough funds," he added.

The Government last week announced that proposed new highways will be put on hold following protests over toll payment imposed by the highway builders. Some 20 proposed projects are involved, excluding projects for which agreements had already been signed.

Following the announcement, several state governments including Johor and Terengganu have requested the projects should go ahead. The Opposition meanwhile, has called for toll collection to be abolished altogether.

"If we do that the Government will have to pay compensation to the companies that built the highways and that involves billions of ringgit. With such large expenditure we will not only have to postpone building roads, but may also not have enough to pay the salaries of civil servants," Dr Mahathir said.

He asked why the highways should be given free to those who own cars when they are more affluent compared to those who travel by train or bus.

"In that case the train and bus fares should be abolished, because it involves those less fortunate than car-owners. That is fair," Dr Mahathir said.

Asked whether the Government might reduce the road tax on vehicles in exchange for the toll-payments, the Prime Minister said:

"The Government can reduce the road tax, oil tax, all taxes can be reduced. (But) after that we will also reduce the salaries of government officers and staff, allocations for housing, and no longer keep up maintenance of Government facilities," he said.

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