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PM: New highways only if people will pay toll

KUALA LUMPUR, Wed. - Following criticisms of toll rate increases, the Government will only approve the construction of new highways if the people are prepared to pay toll for such facilities.

Outlining this Cabinet decision made earlier today, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said the Government would now take over the responsibility of constructing highways but only according to its capability.

"I see we (the people) are still not ready to get quality roads," he told a news conference after announcing a reduction in toll for the new Damansara-Puchong Expressway (LDP).

"If we are not, then the Government will have to postpone building new highways until the people are ready to pay toll."

The Government, Dr Mahathir said, would also have to defer certain infrastructure projects now that it had to pay RM85 million a year in compensation to Lingkaran Lebuhraya Transkota Sdn Bhd, the concessionaire for the LDP, for disallowing the RM1.50 toll.

"Eventually, we will have to defer certain infrastructure projects which have already been planned," he said.

If privatisation of highway projects were postponed, Dr Mahathir said road users would have to pay higher toll because it would be more costly to construct roads in future.

"If we can build the highways fast through privatisation now, then the toll imposed will be lower," he said. "But if the highways are built 10 or 15 years later, then the toll rates will be higher as the cost will definitely have increased with time."

Citing an example, he said the first highway - the 40km Kuala Lumpur-Seremban stretch - was built in the late 1970s at RM42 million.

"If we want to build this highway today, it could easily cost between RM150 million and RM200 million. Obviously, toll rates would also have to be higher.

"But since we built the highway earlier, we were able to keep the toll rates low."

Referring to the protests against the LDP toll hike, Dr Mahathir said he had no choice but to intervene in the issue as there were claims that the Government would lose in the coming general election for increasing the toll.

"When the Government is threatened, it has to act in a populist way," he said. "There has also been pressure, especially from the Opposition which deliberately instigated the people, with support from the Press, to go against the Government on this issue."

On Malaysian toll rates, Dr Mahathir gave the reminder that the rates were among the lowest in the world, partly due to government subsidy.

Citing an example, he said the Government built half of the North-South Expressway before it was handed over to Projek Lebuhraya Utara-Selatan to complete and maintain the entire stretch.

"We had given the part that the Government had built free of charge to the concessionaire," he said. "We had also given the concessionaire soft loans to help them reduce their cost.

That was why toll rates for the NSE were lower, he said.

"We only pay 11.5 sen per km compared to Japan," he said, "where motorists pay RM1 for every kilometre they travel."

The Prime Minister was asked why toll rates were higher in Malaysia when the Thai Government did not collect toll for the 1,000-km Haadyai-Bangkok highway.

His response: "The people have failed to realise that the Haadyai-Bangkok highway was built by the American Government to facilitate the movement of its forces. That is why there is no toll collected."

Dr Mahathir then invited the Press and non-governmental organisations to see for themselves how highways were built in other Southeast Asian countries and the amount of toll charged.

However, he said Singapore had to be excluded because it only had city roads.

"I will give a prize to those who can write a report on any other developing country that has good roads like Malaysia but imposes lower toll rates," he said.

"But they must, among others, take into account population, size of country and type of roads built and compare the roads with those we have built," he added.

Citing the example of the Damansara-Puchong Expressway, Dr Mahathir said only 34 per cent of motorists paid toll as it was an open toll system.

Motorists, he said, got to use six kilometres of the LDP for free even before they started paying toll.

"If they want to avoid paying toll, they can get off just before the toll plaza, get into the trunk road and then get back on the LDP," he said. "They can also use the alternative route if they do not wish to pay toll."

Dr Mahathir said it was not the responsibility of the concessionaire to build alternative routes as they would create unnecessary competition for themselves.

He described this as illogical and likened it to a "cinema owner showing the same movie outside his cinema."

"While the Government normally builds alternative routes," he said, "we cannot maintain them like the highways."

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