

31/07/1999

PM: Highway project not a political gimmick

Farush Khan; Rosli Zakaria

KEMAMAN, Fri. - Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today said a toll highway will be built between Kuantan and Kota Baru as soon as possible, and made it clear this is not a political gimmick to win the general election.

The Prime Minister said the highway would act as a catalyst - benefiting the people, pushing up the value of land and boosting economic activities in Pahang, Terengganu and Kelantan. It would cost close to RM3 billion.

"It will be undertaken in phases by a consortium of three experienced companies and funded through cheap loans," he told a Press conference at the Kertih airport at the end of his visit to Terengganu.

Dr Mahathir was asked about the highway project which had been planned sometime ago. It was then estimated to cost RM4 billion.

He said the reduction in the cost would be made possible with the engagement of a contractor who was able to offer a lower price.

Dr Mahathir hoped the people would co-operate with the authorities to ensure a smooth implementation of the project.

The present coastal road between Kuantan and Kota Baru is about 380km and it takes a motorist about five hours due to existing road conditions.

With the proposed highway, the distance will be cut by about 40km and the time reduced by about two hours.

Dr Mahathir said the Government was aware that the traffic volume along the proposed highway would be much lower than that of the North-South Expressway.

In view of this, he said, the authorities involved would have to look for funds to compensate for the low toll collection.

Asked on the possibility of the Opposition parties claiming that the proposed highway was the Barisan Nasional's way of fishing for more votes, Dr Mahathir said he believed they would do so.

"They can say it but we are doing this (implementing projects) all the time ... not just when election is near. Other roads are also built and they were not built during election time."

He said the Opposition parties established pacts when they were facing elections, whereas the BN maintained its coalition all the time.

"They will make a lot of accusations when elections are near, but at other times they are not so critical. It is obvious they are very critical when elections are near ... even to the extent of abusing others and calling me Firaun (Pharaoh)."

On how the toll highway would spur development in the three States, Dr Mahathir said the value of land would shoot up manifold and rapid development would take place as evident from the experience of the North-South Expressway.

"Not one or twice as much, but sometimes 100 times more than the original value. This (proposed highway) will become part of the catalyst of economic growth which will enrich the poor who own land now considered remote."

Poor landowners would benefit a lot as they would be able to lease out their land and purchase shares in industries.

Dr Mahathir said he was upset with the attitude of the Opposition which always "deliberately raised (the people's) sentiment about toll roads".

He said they did not seem to want to understand that without tolls it would be impossible to build highways.

The Government, he said, had been and would continue to provide

assistance wherever possible to help reduce toll charges for the benefit of users.

Compared to the rates in many other countries, the toll charges on Malaysian highways were "the cheapest".

On measures to be taken to keep the toll charges along the proposed East-West Highway as low as possible, Dr Mahathir said a study was being made to determine how the Federal and State Governments could contribute so that the consortium would not charge high toll which would cause the people to "scream" and the Opposition to turn it into an issue.

He said based on studies, highways reduced accident rates to one-tenth of those occurring along normal roads.

"We want to save lives of roadusers, but the Opposition, supported by non-governmental organisations, want to see more people killed than use better roads."

On the people's land that would have to be acquired to make way for the proposed highway, he said the owners would be given reasonable compensation.

Asked on the proposed expansion of the Sultan Mahmud Airport in Seberang Takir, Kuala Terengganu, he said it would be undertaken.

On possible objections by some quarters, including those affected by such projects, Dr Mahathir said: "What can we do? These people want an airport but do not want to part with their land. We don't understand this.

"They want facilities but are not prepared to contribute. They do not give us for free. We pay them. In the past, their land has no value, but now the value has gone up.

"Take Sepang, for example. The Government gave land at RM500 per acre, but when they wanted to sell back to the Government for the (Kuala Lumpur International) airport project, they sold the land at RM7 per sq foot ... a high rate.

"In Langkawi, it used to be between RM300-and RM400 per acre, but when the Government wanted to buy over the land, it went up to RM5 per sq ft," he said.

(END)