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## Ports vital to economic growth

VARIOUS measures introduced to attract shipping to Port Klang, which are part of the Government's aim to put Port Klang on par with the likes of Singapore and Hong Kong, are yielding results.

In its effort to turn Port Klang into a regional hub for transportation, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said the Government relaxed the cabotage policy, eased foreign equity requirement to shipping agencies, provided one-stop administrative facilities, and introduced changes to the total port operating environment.

"These measures, I am happy to say, are yielding good results," Dr Mahathir said when opening the 21st World Ports Conference and Trade Exhibition in Sungai Besi, Selangor, yesterday.

He said the Government has been developing Port Klang and other ports as they are vital to the country's economic growth.

These ports handle 90 per cent of the country's trade valued at about US\$140 billion (US\$1 = RM3.80) a year.

Malaysia, aspiring to be a regional hub for transportation, has been promoting Port Klang as a load centre and transshipment hub.

The Government's aim is for Port Klang to be the regional hub, on par with other international ports such as Singapore and Hong Kong, the Prime Minister said.

Dr Mahathir said the attractiveness of ports is no longer due to strategic locations but their efficient and prompt services and the land and sea transportation networks.

These enable the ports to have the goods delivered to their final destination and to receive and store goods coming from different locations and be ready to load them on ships which call in at the shortest possible time.

"There was a time when ports were havens for ships to call to load and unload goods and to replenish their supplies. Today, ships can circle the globe without running short of fuel or supplies.

"If they have to call at ports, it is because they have to drop or pick up goods. As such, they can pick up and choose which ports they need to call at," he said.

Dr Mahathir said the port sector's role in the development of a country's economy is expected to increase.

A well-developed port infrastructure is a vital part of an efficient trading system and network, and sea transport has remained the most efficient and cheapest method of moving goods.

"In Asia, successful and prosperous economies have actually been built simply by providing first class port services.

"It is worthwhile noting that a big national hinterland need not be the limiting factor towards growth and greatness of ports," he said.

Although the past year has been a relatively difficult year, Dr Mahathir said given the resilience of the Asia-Pacific region he is confident that there are vast opportunities for growth in the port sector.

In an increasingly competitive environment, it is incumbent upon port operators to ensure that the needs of users are met.

"The Government and the private sector have been working very well together to develop the port sector and I am certain if we continue to assist each other, we can create more opportunities and devise ways for stronger cooperation."

Later at a press conference, Dr Mahathir said the level of support services in Malaysia has improved much compared with a few years ago. This is reflected by the rapid increase in the tonnage and the number of containers being handled now.

"If we can run our port efficiently and offer excellent service, we too can emerge as the foremost port in the region ... moreover, we have a large hinterland to produce and collect goods from."

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