

04/09/1999

Strategic infrastructure vital for the country's future

Dr Ahmad Ibrahim

THE Prime Minister is being ridiculed yet again. This is of course not the first time.

It has happened before. Years ago when Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad initiated the national car project, he was criticised.

Some blamed the project as unwise spending of public funds. Others predicted it would not succeed.

Of course they have all been proven wrong. Nowadays, many among the earlier sceptics are singing a different tune.

Proton has not only emerged as a market leader in Malaysia but has also made inroads in the export market.

Furthermore, the spin-offs from the Proton project in terms of technology transfer and the mushrooming of automotive parts manufacturers have been most valuable to the country.

Not to mention the skill and experience gained in an industry which has always been the domain of only developed countries.

Now we hear of many other developing countries trying to do the same.

With election around the corner, critics of many government infrastructure projects are again having a field day.

Of late, the multimedia super corridor project, for example, has been at the receiving end of much ridicule and scepticism.

Not to mention Putrajaya. The groups complaining may have changed but the line of criticism has remained similar: a waste of public funds; the country is not ready, and the money is better spent elsewhere.

The irony of it all is that the people with the grouses are also the same ones who would like to see the country making headway on the economic front.

They are also the same people who would like to see Malaysians enjoy a better standard of living and improved quality of life.

But the question begging for an answer is, can Malaysia truly achieve and sustain economic progress without the necessary investment in strategic infrastructure? Definitely not.

It is common knowledge that the only way for any economy to move forward is to continue to have projects which can generate income in a sustainable manner.

This means projects will not only have to grow bigger but new projects will have to be found and nurtured.

And as projects grow bigger and are more diversified, the demand on infrastructure is also bound to increase.

More roads are needed to move goods efficiently. More basic utilities such as water and electricity will have to be made available to drive the projects.

Tools of communication will have to be upgraded to improve efficiency and reliability.

Manpower of suitable skills and experience has to be found.

Unless such basic infrastructure needs are adequately addressed, there is no way economic projects can be implemented effectively.

This is exactly what has happened in many developing countries of the South.

The governments there have ignored the need to invest in strategic infrastructure.

And failure to invest in the necessary infrastructure has inevitably

culminated in massive bottlenecks in transportation, communications and production.

It has been disastrous for the economies. The results of such neglect have been dissatisfied investors, inefficient manufacturers and uncompetitive products.

It is a sad fact that many countries in the world have chosen to neglect wise investments in the relevant infrastructure.

And when it comes to infrastructure there is no denying the fact the government will have to take the lead.

Malaysia must count itself fortunate to have a government which is not only forward thinking but also very proactive.

Not many countries in the South are fortunate enough to have the calibre of government that Malaysians enjoy today.

Just visit any of the other developing countries in the South.

The minute you arrive at the airport you can already form an impression about the country.

Slow immigration clearance. Slow baggage clearance. Why? Because facilities have never been upgraded.

As they all say, first impression counts. Once visitors get cheesed off with conditions at the entry point, then there is a good chance that they will strike out the country from their list of preferred destinations.

The same would apply to potential investors. Yet when the government went ahead with KLIA, criticisms abounded.

The critics say we do not need such a big airport. They complain the airport is under utilised.

The charges are too expensive. Though some of the concerns are justified, and no doubt can be improved, the view that we should not have invested in KLIA is totally misplaced.

Subang was already choking. If steps were not taken to move the airport to Sepang, it would not be long before travel bottlenecks will rear their ugly heads in Subang.

It is important to plan ahead. And we must remember that KLIA is not just built for today.

It is an investment for the future. As our export trade grows, Malaysia needs to have a state of the art efficient air cargo infrastructure.

There is no way we can compete otherwise.

If Malaysia is to leapfrog into a developed country, we have to invest wisely in strategic infrastructure.

(END)