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Mahathir-Expressway

TERENGGANU CAN HELP MAKE EXPRESSWAY TOLL LESS BURDENSOME, SAY PM

KUALA LUMPUR, Dec 23 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has prescribed several options for the PAS-run Terengganu government to help bring down toll, at least on the Terengganu sector of the proposed privatised east coast expressway.

"The proposed road for the Terengganu sector is entirely a new stretch. As such the Terengganu government should subsidise its construction if it wants lower toll," the prime minister said.

Among other options, the state government could acquire the affected land and give it free to the road-builders and subsidise certain quantum of the toll rates, he said.

"In this way the people will not be overly burdened by high toll. Otherwise we'll not be able to build it," Dr Mahathir said responding to questions on the matter at a press conference here after launching Bank Negara Malaysia's new millennium commemorative coin.

The proposed expressway became mired in a controversy arising from concern that the opposition-held state government may not be receptive to toll collection going by the abolition of the toll on the Sultan Mahmud Bridge in Kuala Terengganu in the first week upon unseating the Barisan Nasional state government.

The abolition of the bridge toll was in keeping with its promise in the PAS manifesto for last month's general election.

In Parliament yesterday, opposition leader and PAS president Datuk Fadzil Noor said that while accepting the federal government's rationale for toll-collection on the proposed privatised highway, the levy should not burden the people.

Dr Mahathir said the Terengganu government itself, if it has ample funds, could build the expressway and collect the toll.

"It is the Terengganu government's right, if it has sufficient money, to build it and also collect the toll," he said.

The prime minister said the federal government would proceed with the expressway project if toll-collection was allowed.

The proposed expressway would not have a large traffic volume, unlike expressways in the peninsular west coast, he said.

"Lower toll means making it difficult for the concessionaires to recoup their expenditure.

"One way to lower the toll is through government subsidies. In actual fact the government has subsidised toll on existing expressways in various forms," Dr Mahathir said.

The prime minister said without federal government subsidies, toll on Malaysian expressways could be as exorbitant as in the other countries.

"In fact the toll in Malaysia is the lowest compared to that levied in other countries. This is because of government subsidies for land acquisition. It even hand over completed highways to concessionaires so that they can lower their costs," he said.

On opposition-held Terengganu's efforts to attract more foreign investment, Dr Mahathir said the federal government had always been encouraging inflow of capital in the state.

"Even we have invested in Terengganu. For example Petronas and other partners of Petronas between them have invested 60 billion ringgit.

"Practically every petrochemical project is located in Terengganu in addition to other industries like Perwaja (the steel mill in Kemaman)," he

added.

-- BERNAMA

GM RYN