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Mahathir-expressway

WORK ON EAST COAST EXPRESSWAY TO START SOONEST POSSIBLE

KERTEH, July 30 (Bernama) -- Work on the proposed East Coast expressway linking Pahang, Terengganu and Kelantan will begin at the earliest possible time, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said.

However it would be built in phases because of the low traffic volume and high costs involved, he said.

The government would assist the company undertaking the project secure soft loans to ease the burden it would have to bear because of the low traffic volume, he said.

Dr Mahathir announced this at a press conference at the airport here at the end of his two-day working visit to Terengganu.

(A Malaysian Mining Corporation (MMC)-led consortium would build the proposed expressway in four phases over 334 km from Karak in Pahang to Chendering in Terengganu. There would be 16 tiered interchanges in between.)

The prime minister said the government was making efforts to cut the construction costs by RM1 billion.

It was originally estimated to cost RM4 billion and the government was looking for contractors who could build it for RM3 billion, he said.

Quoting statistics, Dr Mahathir said tolled expressways contributed towards reducing fatal road accidents.

The number of accidents on tolled roads accounted for only one-tenth of the total occurring on normal roads although normal roads comparatively carry less traffic, he said.

"In fact building tolled expressways is one way of reducing fatal road accidents. We want to save lives but the opposition parties, the DAP in particular, with the support of PAS and several other NGOs, prefer to see more road-users killed than saved through having good roads," he said.

Dr Mahathir dismissed suggestions that the government proposed to build the east coast expressway to fish to votes.

He said the government built roads all the time and not because of an impending general election.

Asked what impact the proposed expressway would have on the development of peninsular east coast, Dr Mahathir said its significance would be invaluable.

"We find that the value of land along highways has soared. There'll be rapid development. Just look at the North-South Highway, the land value has not only doubled, tripled but soared by over 100-fold when we built the highway," he said.

He said the proposed east coast expressway would serve as a catalyst for economic growth and bring returns to previously isolated and poor landowners.

Owners of land which would have to be acquired to make way for the proposed expressway would be reasonably compensated, he said.

A feasibility study would be carried out to determine the kind of support the federal and state governments could give the company building the proposed expressway.

This is to alleviate its financial burden arising from low traffic volume which would otherwise prompt the company to inevitably impose high toll on users, he said.

The prime minister was responding to a question about the company's anticipated losses because of the projected low traffic volume.

Dr Mahathir also said that tender for the expansion of Kuala Terengganu's Sultan Mahmud Airport had been issued.

The project was designed to make the airport the main gateway to peninsular east coast.

-- BERNAMA
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