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MAHATHIR-EXCEL

AUTUMN OPENING FOR MSIAN-BACKED LONDON EXHIBITION CENTRE

KUALA LUMPUR, Jan 28 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today visited ExCel, London's premier exhibition centre under construction in the Royal Docks which will be ready by autumn as scheduled.

Briefing a delegation led by Dr Mahathir, the Chief Executive of London International Exhibition Centre plc (LIEC), Iain Shearer, said ExCel or "Exhibition Centre London" will host its first show in November this year.

The project, billed as London's largest stand-alone exhibition and conference centre, will make available 65,000 square metres of lettable exhibition hall space under its first phase.

ExCeL is associated with Country Heights Holdings Bhd (CHHB), which initiated the project in September 1997 together with the project founders including English Partnerships, the urban redevelopment authority of the UK government.

CHHB, a niche property developer listed on the Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange, said in a statement issued here today that the company took the opportunity during the regional financial crisis in 1997 to look abroad for investment.

Consequently, it took majority equity in the project which had stalled for lack of funds as well as leading an international bond issue with Barclays Capital, to raise more than 183.3 million pounds (RM1,136.46 million), thereby successfully financing the first phase.

The project financing model has won recognition in this financial centre, having recently been awarded the title of Best Property Deal of the Year by a magazine published by the Euromoney group.

Today, CHHB has a reduced indirect effective stake of 12 percent held through its equity in Nusa Pacifik Sdn Bhd, a company linked with the Usaha Tegas Group in Malaysia.

ExCeL remains very much a Malaysian project by virtue of the fact that Malaysian shareholders hold up to 42.7 percent equity in the company, the single largest shareholding.

Both Country Heights and Usaha Tegas Sdn Bhd have two representatives each on the board of ExCeL.

CHHB Founder and Managing Director, Tan Sri Lee Kim Yew, who was also present, said he was very proud to be associated with this prestigious development and "to fly the flag for Malaysia" in an overseas market.

"Although there are cultural differences as well as challenges in operating in a sophisticated highly industrialised country, we have done well and we are happy that the project is nearing completion and ready to be open for business," he said.

He added that through this involvement, CHHB will also be in a unique position to "import" state-of-the-art construction techniques into Malaysia.

Shearer told Dr Mahathir that ExCeL was first mooted about eight years ago.

The Prime Minister commended Country Heights for its vision and initiative in investing at a difficult time, adding that "ExCeL is an excellent example of how a Malaysian company can come into the UK and do business, and succeed".

"Because of its involvement in ExCeL, Country Heights has earned for itself a good reputation in the UK and is now moving on to look for other ventures in London," he said.

The Prime Minister and his delegation were briefed on arrival by Shearer on the project's background and progress and also taken on a tour of the site, which is more than 50 percent complete.

He spent about two hours at the site at the Royal Victoria Docks, which is one of the largest of its kind in the world.

Dr Mahathir, who arrived in London Thursday from Grenada, is scheduled to fly to Paris Saturday for a working lunch with President Jacques Chirac.--BERNAMA

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