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Extension work at airport will boost Miri's image as resort destination

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DATUK Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad "jokingly" issued a challenge to Sarawak Chief Minister Tan Sri Abdul Taib Mahmud that the Federal Government would consider turning Miri airport into one of international standard if the State Government was willing to share its cost.

Taib spontaneously agreed that the State Government was willing to fork out RM25 million for the RM120 million project.

And the result was that the project was launched by Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi on Friday. The project is being undertaken by construction giant Ekran Berhad.

Construction is scheduled to be completed within 20 months. With Ekran Berhad's record of delivering mega projects ahead of time, this airport extension can be completed within 18 months.

The airport will not only boost tourism industry in Malaysia but also act as a catalyst for Miri to attain resort city status by the year 2005.

The existing runway of 1,980 metres will be extended to 2,930 metres to cater for bigger aircraft, including Airbus A330.

Speaking at the launching, Taib did not only relate the "joke" with the Prime Minister but also confidently announced that once completed, together with other related development projects, Miri would be transformed into a beautiful city akin to St Antonio of Texas.

"St Antonio has a river dividing the city," he said, adding that similar structure would also be featured in the elevation of Miri to a resort city.

The Deputy Prime Minister was optimistic that the airport extension project would be the catalyst not only for Miri's development but also the State.

No other leader was more thankful at the official launching of the project than Miri-born Deputy Chief Minister Tan Sri George Tan Hong Nam.

"One of the critical success factors for Miri to attain a resort city status is the availability of direct air linkages with major cities in the world," he said.

He said the Miri airport was the third busiest airport in Malaysia in terms of aircraft movement, behind the Kuala Lumpur International Airport and Kota Kinabalu International Airport.

He backed his contention with statistics. Last year alone the total aircraft movement was 36,602 and in terms of passenger volume it ranked sixth, just slightly less than Johor Baru, with an annual passenger traffic of nearly one million.

Miri is accessed by air links from Kuala Lumpur, Kota Kinabalu, Labuan and Kuching either by the Boeing 737-400 series or Fokker 50. There are a total of 107 of these flights per week.

The airport, due to its strategic location, will also serve as an alternative airport for A300s or other similar aircraft diversions in times of bad weather at the Kuching or Kota Kinabalu airports.

The extension of the existing airport is also aimed at exploiting Miri as an international tourist destination.

Chan said the world's largest cave is located in Miri. The great historical and world-renowned Niah Cave where remains of stone-age men who lived 40,000 years ago were found in Miri Division.

It also has the most number of national parks in Sarawak - Lambir, Niah, Mulu and Usun Apau. Mulu with all its natural wonders has been selected as

the focal point for tourism in the State.

Tourism is making the greatest impact on Miri's economy, attracting travellers from all over the world and Brunei. With the elevation of Miri to city status, it will be the second city in Sarawak after Kuching.

Miri Division is also one of the State's major revenue earners. With its vastness in land area and rich resources, and its role as a modern commercial hub, Miri Division alone accounted for more than 60 per cent of the State's revenue.

History has it that Miri, set on the northern fringe of Sarawak bordering Brunei and Sabah, was once only a humble fishing village.

The town emerged from obscurity to prominence in a matter of years when oil was discovered in August 1910. The oil industry remains by far the biggest contributor to both Miri and the State.

Other industries such as forestry and agriculture have burgeoned over the years. The construction, retail and financial sectors have also contributed greatly to the town's rapid economic development.

With the State Government vigorously implementing mega development projects in Miri, by the year 2005 the town will become an ultra-modern seaside resort city.

This will enable Miri to fulfil its role as the premier city of northern Sarawak and a predominant resort destination of international calibre.

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