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Mahathir-Excel

M'SIAN-BACKED LONDON EXHIBITION CENTRE TO HOLD 1ST SHOW IN NOVEMBER

KUALA LUMPUR, Jan 28 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today visited ExCel, a premier exhibition centre under construction in London.

The project in the Royal Docks was initiated by Country Heights Holdings Bhd in 1997 together with the project founders that include English Partnerships, the urban redevelopment authority of Britain.

Country Heights, in a statement issued here, said ExCel or "Exhibition Centre London" would be ready by autumn as scheduled.

London International Exhibition Centre plc (LIEC) chief executive Iain Shearer, when briefing a delegation led by Dr Mahathir, said ExCel would host its first show this November.

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

Country Heights, a niche property developer listed on the Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange, said it took the opportunity during the regional financial crisis in 1997 to look abroad for investment.

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 London, having recently been awarded the title of Best Property Deal of the Year by a magazine published by the Euromoney group.

Today, Country Heights has a reduced indirect effective stake of 12 percent held through its equity in Nusa Pasifik 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.

Country Heights managing director Tan Sri Lee Kim Yew, who was also present, was quoted as saying that he was proud to be associated with the 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.

Country Heights would also be in a unique position to "import" state-of-the-art construction techniques into Malaysia, he said.

The statement said Dr Mahathir commended Country Heights for its vision and initiative in investing at a difficult time.

"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," Dr Mahathir was quoted as saying.

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.

Shearer is reported to have told Dr Mahathir that ExCeL was first mooted about eight years ago.

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

The prime minister, who arrived in London Thursday from Grenada, is scheduled to fly to Paris on Saturday for a working lunch with President Jacques Chirac.

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