

25/05/2000

NECC to contribute to country's growth

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PETALING JAYA, Wed. - Malaysia is set to become a major player in the exhibitions and conventions industry with the construction of the National Exhibition and Convention Centre.

The RM1 billion project, which is being developed by Malaysia Airports Bhd, is set to proceed at the site of the former Terminal One of the Sultan Abdul Aziz Shah Airport in Subang.

It will feature the region's largest exhibition centre with 100,000 sq metres of exhibition space and will be the only centre in the world with direct access to a Boeing-747 runway.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who launched the project today, said it was the Government's hope that the NECC would become a "benchmark" for other exhibition and convention centres worldwide in the future.

Dr Mahathir, in his opening address, said that critics would label the project as a mega-project and only a waste of money, while overlooking the benefits that it would bring to the country's economy.

"They will say all these things but just like any other so-called mega project, this one will also contribute to the country's coffers and economic development," he said.

Dr Mahathir said the Government had given much thought to the best way to utilise the site after the international airport was moved to Sepang.

He said the Government had to come up with the best possible solution as the Sultan Abdul Aziz Shah airport had a runway which could accommodate a B-747 aircraft and had other excellent facilities.

"We then thought it was only natural that this area be turned into an exhibition and convention centre," he said.

Citing examples, Dr Mahathir said exhibitors would, among others, not be required to pay taxes.

He said the Government hoped that Malaysia Airports would be able to make full use of the facility.

The new centre, he said, would also be able to attract conventions attended by up to 20,000 people.

"There may be different events during a convention but I am sure all those who are attending it would want to meet one another at one time at least once.

"This is where such a centre will be sought," he said.

Dr Mahathir said he was confident in Malaysia Airports' ability to run the billion ringgit state-of-the-art facility.

"To run such a state-of-the art facility you need a state-of-the-art management.

"And I have confidence in the Malaysia Airports team," he said, adding that the Malaysia Airports had organised the Sepang F1 Circuit "very well".

He told Malaysia Airports not to limit the promotion of the facility via advertising only but through aggressive marketing as well.

"I expect the Malaysia Airports to spend a lot of money to advertise and market this facility," he said, adding that it could also be turned into a tourist destination.

Dr Mahathir said he was also looking forward to the completion of the project which was scheduled for end of 2002.

"The more time we take, the less money we will make. I like things to be

done fast," he said.

In jest he added: "At the age of 75, you would not like things to be delayed."

The NECC will also provide the opportunity for Malaysian companies to showcase their products, services and expertise and provide work opportunities.

Malaysia Airports executive chairman Tan Sri Basir Ismail said studies had shown that exhibitions and conventions would have a huge effect on local economy.

"The strong correlation between the country's gross domestic product and passenger traffic means that any effort to increase growth of the economy will undoubtedly increase passenger traffic into the country."

To be equipped with the latest state-of-the-art facilities, the NECC is also designed around the twin concepts of flexibility and functionality, while providing the space, access, service and ambiance needed by every exhibitor.

Its convention centre will be able to cater for conventions as small as 20 delegates to as big as 20,000 delegates.

Plans for auxiliary facilities include a five-star hotel, a 5,500-bay car park, mosque and other amenities.

The upgrading of the public transportation system to the area will involve plans to extend the light rail transit and rail link systems to the KL city centre.

Asked if Malaysia Airports would bring in external partners to operate the centre, Basir said the company would initially "go alone" on the project, but would consider partnerships later on.

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