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New port sails to success

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WHEN blueprints on mega infrastructure projects are announced, they do not always meet instant approval from the public.

But years down the road, many will see the wisdom of such under-takings, and be grateful that someone has the foresight to implement them in a hurried manner.

The North-South Expressway and other highways, the Penang Bridge and the Kuala Lumpur International Airport are fine examples.

Similarly, when a privatisation agreement with the Government was signed on March 24, 1995, to set in motion the development of Port of Tanjung Pelepas, also known as Johor's second port, there were many sceptics.

Among the often-raised questions were "Do we need another port?" and "How will the locals benefit?"

Valid questions, considering that Johor already had a major port, Johor Port in Pasir Gudang, and that some 100 fishing families in Tanjung Pelepas had to be relocated for the new port project.

Not just another infrastructure project, but a state-of-the-art sea-port that had been visioned to be transshipment hub in the region and rival the best in the world.

It was also one of the few mega projects in the country not to have been shelved or rescheduled despite the economic slowdown which started in the second half of 1997.

PTP started operations late last year and was officially opened by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad on March 13.

Today, it prides itself for not only its sophistication, capability and efficiency, but also for its ability to absorb locals into its workforce as well as to generate many supporting economic activities, or spill-overs.

In fact, port officers repeatedly said, one significant point about PTP was that it had all along been committed to creating jobs for residents and local companies.

At present, nearly 70 per cent of PTP's employment of 450 comprised the people from Johor.

PTP is expected to have a work-force of some 1,600 when its Phase One, a RM2.4 billion development, is completed by the middle of next year. And given its policy of giving priority to locals, there will be more vacancies for residents in nearby areas.

As it is, many of the workers come from surrounding areas, like Kampung Melayu, Kampung Tanjung Adang, Kampung Paya Mengkuang, Kampung Tiram Duku, Kampung Pok, Kampung Baru Muafakat and other villages in Gelang Patah and Tanjung Kupang. Others come from Pasir Gudang, Johor Baru and Tebrau areas.

In fact, PTP once distributed job application forms through penghulu and district offices, and urged locals who were working in other States or overseas to consider joining the port as their skills would be useful towards attaining its mission.

Besides, PTP has been working with its customers and prospective customers on how they could offer more jobs to locals.

It is also embarking on joint programmes with customers to equip the workforce to handle the changing tasks in an increasingly knowledge-based economy.

Mohd Najib Abdul Wahab, 39, from Gelang Patah, worked with a foreign

company before joining PTP as a driver last year. And he does not regret the switch at all.

"I am more motivated to work now, knowing that this is a Malaysian company. I also earn more than before and there are opportunities to work overtime.

"I thank PTP for offering jobs to me and others from this area, many of whom are now learning new skills," Mohd Najib said.

Operations executive Abdul Mutalib Adam, 32, from Kampung Tiram Duku which is a few kilometres from the port, once worked in Kuala Lumpur but grabbed the chance of building a career close to his hometown.

"I come from this area, thus I am proud to be part of this set-up, and to contribute to the development of Johor, and of PTP into a premier port not only in Malaysia but the world."

Abdul Mutalib, who said PTP also encouraged staff to pursue further studies, now plans to take a diploma course in logistics.

Rosli Ahmad, 35, from Johor Baru, worked with property developers before but now finds his job as a manager who promotes and markets the industrial land within PTP as the best thing to have happened to his career.

"The prospects look good here. I want to stay and grow with this company, because I really share its vision."

PTP envisages to be Southeast Asia's premier transshipment hub and help realise the nation's goals in achieving Vision 2020. It strives to be one of the most modern and efficient ports in the world. Towards these objectives, it is positioning itself to become the driving force behind the establishment of smart partnerships among ports, shipping lines and logistics providers for the benefit of cargo owners.

Besides job opportunities, PTP has also succeeded in ensuring that locals are offered business opportunities. Several jobs have been awarded to local contractors.

Office cleaning services are handled by a Johor Baru-based company, while its cafeteria is operated by a restaurant chain based in Gelang Patah. Grass cutting and garbage collection jobs have also been given to locals.

With new technologies coming to the port area, PTP is also emphasising on the critical area of research and development. The port's plans include the establishment of a centre of excellence for manufacturing, design and development of cranes.

To the nation, ports are among the most vital aspects of national transport infrastructure, although they may not command the glamorous image enjoyed by airports such as the KLIA, for instance.

In fact, one maritime nation is known to have its port and related economic activities contributing some 30 per cent to the country's gross domestic product.

For most trading nations, sea-ports are main transit links with trading partners, and thus are a focal point where all inland linkages converge. The importance of ports cannot be over-emphasised. An estimated 95 per cent of total world trade is moved by sea.

All the aircraft in the world cannot carry more than three per cent of the world cargo, and air freight is expensive. The other two per cent of cargo moves by rail to land-locked countries.

Besides a gateway for trade, most ports also attract commercial infrastructure such as banking facilities, logistic back-up services and industrial activities.

Port projects invariably involve large capital investment to fulfil their functions and be regional economic multipliers and large employers of labour.

Thus the port sector has traditionally been known as an engine of

growth, and in many cases, they also triumph during an economic slowdown.

In the face of globalisation and dismantling of trade barriers, Malaysian ports will have a big role to play towards Vision 2020 as exports increase from emerging economies in the region.

"The Malaysian Government is confident that the port sector's further growth will thrust the economy into a new era of globalisation," said Dr Mahathir when opening a conference in conjunction with PTP's official opening in March.

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