

12 JUL 2000

Bakun-Township

NEW TOWNSHIP EVOLVING FROM BAKUN RESETTLEMENT SCHEME

By: Edward Stephen Subeng

BELAGA, July 12 (Bernama) -- A new township is being planned for the Bakun resettlement scheme, 37 km from here, Bakun Development Committee (BDC) chairman Datuk Dr James Jemut Masing said.

With land already alienated for the purpose, project developer the Sarawak Land Custody and Development Authority (LCDA) has envisaged a new township with its own administrative and commercial centre complete with public amenities like schools and hospital.

Its mission is to provide the 10,000 settlers in the scheme decent and comfortable living so that they could be the main catalyst for further progress of the area, Masing told Bernama in an interview.

For a start towards this end, the state government had declared the resettlement scheme a sub-district and the status enables it to have a resident Sarawak Administrative Officer stationed there plus a small complement of police personnel to maintain law and order.

"I am confident, based on the current plantation activities and the impending implementation of the Bakun hydro-electricity project, the scheme has all it needs to propel itself toward an eventual full district status," he said.

"As such I do not see any pressing need for it to come under the jurisdiction of other government administrative agency as had been suggested by some.

"Progress and good governance have and will surely come to Bakun under its current administration of the Belaga District Office," Masing said.

At the moment four companies namely Shin Yang, KTS, Sam Ling and Ekran are developing their own oil palm plantations to serve the economic hinterland for the resettlement scheme while another had yet to start planting.

"The total area is about 30,000 hectares and in fact the whole scheme is about being surrounded by them."

First harvesting is expected within five years or so from now and this would generate tremendous amount of purchasing power in the area, he said.

Masing said that over time the settlers, who are understandably less enthusiastic about working in the plantations for their livelihood now, would be able to adapt themselves to the rather regimented life there.

Relocating the residents cost RM200 million in compensation already given out with another RM20 million still pending due to land disputes among the settlers or family members.

He said upon completion of the 125km-long Bintulu-Bakun Road costing RM300 million by year end, heavy machinery and equipment needed for the hydro-electricity project could be easily moved there.

Completion of a diversion tunnel for the dam by April next year would determine when construction work proper would proceed.

On whether the settlers are happy with their new life there, he said only the older folk may have reservations.

"Bakun is certainly catering for the younger ones. There is round-the-clock electricity supply provided for by SESCO (Sarawak Electricity Supply Corporation) and treated water from the Public Works Department and a polyclinic," he said.

"Those bright students too can now continue with their their education to the highest level without having to worry about scholarship.

"The Bakun Trust Fund has for example since the last three years send 163 to degree and diploma studies which is unprecedented before," he said.

Masing, who is also state Tourism Minister, said the area has at least 10 different indigenous groups, pristine jungle and other attractions waiting to be harnessed and further developed.

"The potentials are big. Once the area is easily accessible we will look into this," he said.

The recent announcement by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohammad that the hydro-electricity project would go on given rising electricity demand in the industrial sector was lauded by the settlers.

"To them, implementing Bakun means unlimited job and business opportunities," said Masing who welcomed plans to downsize the project and only produce 500 megawatt of energy.

The original project is nothing short of being titanic for the country in term of its size, cost and in the number o people directly affected.

It was to have cost RM13 billion, flood an area of 70,000 ha in size and the capacity to generate 2,400 megawatt.

" We can increase its generating capacity later when the needs arises and besides, the state can always sell surplus energy to Sabah and Brunei as well. I am all for Bakun's revival and implementation," added Masing.

-- BERNAMA

ESS RYN