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Trans-Asia rail link project to be discussed at 3rd Asem meet

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ASIAN and European leaders will deliberate on the recommendations by two consultants on the US\$2.5 billion (US\$1 = RM3.80) Trans-Asia rail link project at the third Asia-Europe Meeting (Asem) in Seoul this week.

"Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is expected to present the recommendations at the meeting scheduled for October 20 and 21," Transport Minister Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik said.

He was asked whether the recommendations will be presented at Asem or the informal summit of the Association of South-East Asian Nations (Asean) scheduled next month.

"If I am not mistaken, the Prime Minister will present the recommendations at the Asem meet," he told Business Times in Sepang yesterday.

On September 27, Dr Ling had said that the recommendations of a study on the proposed Trans-Asia rail link will be presented at the Asean informal summit in Singapore from November 22 to 25.

However, he had not dismissed the possibility that the recommendations will also be tabled at the Asean + 3 (Japan, China and South Korea) and Asem meetings.

Since Asem will be held ahead of the Asean informal summit, the recommendations are expected to be presented at the meeting first.

The establishment of a 4,700km Singapore-China Trans-Asia railway link (commencing initially with the railway project of the Mekong Basin development) to be subsequently integrated with the Trans-Europe railway network was proposed at the inaugural Asem in Bangkok in 1996.

Asem countries comprise Brunei, China, Indonesia, Japan, South Korea, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam, Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and the UK. It also includes the European Commission.

The Cabinet endorsed the recommendations for the rail link between Singapore and Kunming in China in September 27.

Dr Ling had said the two consultants have completed their report and he had presented it at the Cabinet meeting.

The massive project was proposed in 1995 and Malaysia was asked to head a special working group to look into its viability.

A committee, chaired by Dr Ling, appointed Malaysian consultants KL Consult and Za'aba Consultant to conduct the study.

The minister said the consultants proposed that the main railway line connect Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Bangkok, Phnom Penh, Hanoi and Kunming. Two spur lines will also be developed, between Vientiane in Laos and the Vung Anh port in Vietnam, and between Myanmar and Thailand.

Dr Ling had noted that it is fortunate all eight countries involved use the same metre-gauge railway tracks.

"We do not need to step up or build new tracks or have trains stop to move on to a different kind of tracks."

The presentation of the recommendations at Asem and Asean meetings is to determine how to finance the project and carry out necessary works.

Work on the project is likely to kickstart in 2003 and completed by 2006.

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