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Trans-Asia Railway Link plans get Cabinet approval

Kamarul Yunus

PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad will present the recommendations of a study on the proposed US\$2.5 billion (US\$1 = RM3.80) Trans-Asia Railway at the November 24 Asean summit in Singapore.

The Cabinet has endorsed the recommendations for the 5,513km rail-link between Singapore and Kunming in China, Transport Minister Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik said yesterday.

"The two consultants have completed their report and I presented this at today's Cabinet meeting. The recommendations will now be deliberated upon by Asean leaders," he told newsmen in Kuala Lumpur.

Asean groups Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.

The report will also be presented for discussion at Asean's dialogue with Japan, China and South Korea, or Asean+3, and also at the Asia-Europe Meeting, Dr Ling said.

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 study took into consideration various things ... the engineering works involved, the socio-economy of the surrounding areas, and issues related to cross-border movements of goods. The next step is to consider ways to implement the recommendations," he said.

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

Dr Ling 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."

On how the project will be funded, Dr Ling said the various governments and private sectors will decide on the matter.

"They will determine whether a consortium will be invited or if the project is to be implemented as a privatization exercise," he said.

The economic benefits will be great, Dr Ling said.

"Like in the case of the North-South Expressway, there will be an economic boom in the areas near the railway line. Housing and industrial estates will crop up. This will be very good for Asean."

Asked when work is expected to start, he said the project is likely to be kickstarted in 2003 and completed by 2006.

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