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2 working groups formed to expedite rail project

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THE Singapore-Kunming Rail Link (SKRL) project has taken a step closer to implementation following the establishment of two working groups on the multi-billion dollar Trans-Asian railway.

A finance committee, chaired by Thailand, has been set up to look into the funding modality not only for the rail project but also for those proposed under the Asean-Mekong Basin Development Cooperation initiative, said Datuk Fu Ah Kiow, Ministry of International Trade and Industry's Parliamentary Secretary.

"The committee will be convening a meeting to discuss ways to finance the projects, but the date is not decided yet," he told Business Times.

Another committee, headed by Myanmar, has meanwhile also been set up and will meet early next year. It is tasked with studying and ensuring the viability of the rail-link.

Leaders of the 10-member Association of South-East Asian Nations (Asean) gave the go-ahead for the railway project at the Seventh Asean Summit in Brunei on November 5-6.

The US\$2.5 billion (US\$1 = RM3.80) railway is in part aimed at strengthening economic linkages between Asean and China.

The 5,500km-long railway will be particularly beneficial for Asean's less developed members, namely Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam.

It has been suggested that it be developed in stages given the heavy investment required, starting with the missing connections between Thailand and Cambodia, and between Cambodia and Vietnam.

Malaysia has indicated interest in participating in a Thai project to work a stretch of the main line.

The Trans-Asian Railway, as mooted by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad at the Asean Summit in 1995, would run from Singapore through Malaysia, Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos and Myanmar to Kunming in south China.

While the participating governments will provide the thrust, private companies are expected to play a key role in the project.

KTM Bhd, for one, is already exploring the possibility of establishing a presence in Cambodia.

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