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Thailand-Border

OPERATING HOURS AT M'SIA-THAI CHECKPOINTS SHOULD BE EXTENDED

By: David Chelliah

KUALA LUMPUR, March 9 (Bernama) -- Bangkok is proposing that the operating hours at various Thai-Malaysian border checkpoints be extended, including the checkpoint at Bukit Kayu Hitam, said Thai Foreign Minister Dr Surakiart Sathirathai.

He said the Bukit Kayu Hitam-Sadao checkpoint should operate 24 hours in order to increase cooperation at the common border and for the mutual economic benefit of both countries.

The newly appointed foreign minister, under Thailand's new government led by Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, said not all border checkpoints should be open for 24-hours but the operating hours at these checkpoints can be extended to facilitate two-way trade.

Dr Surakiart said in an interview with Bernama, during his one-day visit to Kuala Lumpur yesterday, that checkpoints which operate from 5am to 9pm should be extended to 24 hours while those operating for three hours per day should be extended between six and seven hours.

He added that the extended operating hours will smoothen the import and export activities between Thailand and Malaysia, especially at the northern gateway checkpoint.

For instance, he said perishable goods transported from Malaysia to Thailand and vice-versa, often got stranded at the checkpoints when the operating hours expired for the day.

He said the cost to store perishable goods, at both ends, would escalate due to border closure for the day and in return exporters and importers had to bear the additional cost to get their products over.

Dr Surakiart said a working group, with representatives from both governments, are seriously looking into the question of time extension at border checkpoints and have already formulated a mechanism to resolve the issue.

He also said the proposal to open the Bukit Kayu Hitam checkpoint round the clock will also enable Thai workers to work in the northern part of Malaysia.

On Malaysia's plan to source labour from selected countries, he said Prime Minister's Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's invitation for Thai workers to work in industrial estates was highly appreciated.

Dr Surakiart said Thailand was willing to encourage its skilled and unskilled workers to work in Malaysia provided the remuneration is appropriate, working conditions are comfortable and adequate labour safety procedures are observed.

He said a working group, within the Thai Labour Ministry, will be set-up to explore the specific areas in which Thai workers were required in the Malaysian labour market.

"Demand and supply must match and we have to agree on the registration, visa procedures and working environment before we can export our workers to Malaysia," he added.

On Malaysia's proposed construction of a RM10 billion land bridge linking northern peninsular and southern Thailand, he said the status of the 200km project for carrying road, rail and pipeline traffic, is still on.

He said Thailand is optimistic that once the economic situation in both countries improve, the land bridge project will take off the ground.

On Thailand's initiative towards the project, Dr Surakiart said the

masterplan for the project has been finalised by the National Economic and Social Development Board.

He is confident that with the economic recovery in both countries the land bridge project can be implemented in the near future.

On Malaysia's effort to curb smuggling activities along the Thai-Malaysia borders, he said Thailand will render full cooperation to resolve the problem.

He also said Thailand accorded great importance to enhancing bilateral relationship and cooperation with her neighbours.

"We will like to work very closely with our neighbours... even more closer than in the past," he said.

During his one-day visit yesterday, the Thai foreign minister met his Malaysian counterpart, Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar and made a courtesy call on Dr Mahathir at Putrajaya.

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