

09/03/2002

Syed Mokhtar tipped for Senai airport job

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PUBLICITY-SHY Tan Sri Syed Mokhtar Al-Bukhary has emerged as the likeliest candidate for the yet-to-be-announced Federal Government project to upgrade Senai Airport in Johor to a state-of-the-art cargo airport, sources said.

Feasibility studies at this juncture point to the capability of the new Senai Cargo Airport attracting up to 30 per cent of Singapore's air cargo business.

The sources said this optimism is not dented at all by the news that Singapore is going to upgrade the cargo section of Changi Airport.

"The upgrading of the Senai airport does not stop at developing high-tech air cargo facilities. Its modernisation will be complemented by dedicated highways and multi-rail services to Tanjung Pelepas Port (TPT) and Johor Port. Malaysia will have more to offer," said the sources.

The idea is to turn Senai into the nucleus of a commercial multi-transport network and with TPT in the picture, Johor could easily be the region's one-stop centre for importers and exporters, they said.

The cost of upgrading Senai Airport to a cargo airport has yet to be ascertained. But transport analysts believe it could easily run into a few billion ringgit.

"If you're talking about a sophisticated cargo airport complete with the air conditioning and cooling warehouse system, telecommunications system and an interchange to service road and rail links to Tanjung Pelepas Port, Johor Port and the cities, then it would be in the region of a few billion ringgit," said an analyst.

But there is more to it. The upgrading of Senai airport is only a part of the Federal Government's plans to turn Johor into a state-of-the-art integrated transportation hub.

The plans include:

- \* building of Johor Baru Sentral station as an interchange for integrated rail and road transportation services complete with the latest telecommunications and interactive multimedia facilities which are equipped with advanced fibre optics communication. This is said to be even better than KL Sentral.

- \* construction of dedicated highways from Senai to Tanjung Pelepas Port, Johor Port, the proposed Johor Sentral, the futuristic bridge at the Southern International Gateway or Gerbang Perdana that will replace the Johor-Singapore Causeway and the new customs, immigration and quarantine (CIQ) complex at Tanjung Puteri and other cities.

- \* double track electrified rail, light rail transit and monorail from the proposed Johor Sentral to Senai, Tanjung Pelepas Port, Johor Port, Gerbang Perdana, CIQ, other cities in Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand.

The total cost of these mammoth projects, inclusive of the Gerbang Perdana and the CIQ complex, is estimated at around RM27 billion. The project is divided into several phases to be completed over a certain number of years. One of the early phases is the modernisation of the Senai Airport.

Those familiar with the concept and structural plan said that the merging of all the major transportation networks - road, rail, air and sea - will offer a complete system for commercial clients. All will converge at Senai, making it into a mega-transportation hub to cater to commercial transportation needs. And there will be spin-offs.

According to sources, an unidentified Japanese expert conceived the initial plan and submitted it to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad a few years ago.

Many heads, including Konsortium Gerbang Perdana deputy executive chairman Datuk Yahya Abdul Jalil's novel idea of a futuristic bridge to replace the Causeway, contributed to the total plan of turning Johor into the region's central high-tech commercial multi-transportation hub.

Several players in the infrastructure development industry are not surprised if Syed Mokhtar is awarded the Senai Airport project. "He has proven himself in the Tanjung Pelepas Port", remarked a corporate figure involved in the rail industry.

Indeed, he has. With a controlling stake of 60 per cent through his business nominees in the port operation, Pelabuhan Tanjung Pelepas Sdn Bhd (PTP), he succeeded in wooing Denmark's Maersk Sealand International to acquire 30 per cent of TPT. This assured the port of business from the Danish company.

Then he scored a major coup when Taiwan shipping entity, Evergreen Marine Corp, decided to shift its container operations from Singapore - the world's second busiest port after Hong Kong - to Tanjung Pelepas Port.

Syed Mokhtar's navigation of the port would make him the ideal candidate for the job of making the proposed Senai Cargo Airport into a regional air cargo hub.

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