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Conflicting views on reclamation's impact

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SINGAPORE'S Pulau Tekong reclamation project has drawn conflicting views from industry officials, with one side convinced it will not pose a serious threat to Malaysian ports while the other disagrees.

A Malaysian port operator said the shipping sector and the development of southern Johor will not be affected for now, but it will be a different story when new reclamation works are initiated.

"We shouldn't be worried for now but must be alert to future reclamation works carried out by the republic," the source told Business Times in Kuala Lumpur yesterday.

Singapore has been carrying out land reclamation in the Johor Strait over the past few weeks and Malaysia has expressed concern that the activities may narrow the waterway, which is also the border separating the two countries.

Malaysia has argued that the project may hamper ships which call on the Port of Tanjung Pelepas in Gelang Patah and the Pasir Gudang Port and also affect the surrounding ecology and the livelihood of fishermen.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad had said on Saturday that Malaysia wanted an assurance that the reclamation work on the south-eastern part of Pulau Tekong would not adversely affect the deep waterline used as a shipping route.

Singapore's Foreign Ministry had issued a statement on Sunday reiterating that the project was well within its territory, adding that Malaysia's claims that it would affect shipping in the area was "unfounded".

The republic's Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, who is on a three-day official visit here, also expressed the same view.

"The reclamation work is well within Singapore's territory with ample space between the project site and the border in the middle of the Johor Strait," said the source.

He said that the desludging activities actually deepen the strait from its current 16 metres and width of 1.5km, which provides sufficient passage for ships.

He said the project is similar to a houseowner who wants to renovate and extend his kitchen and has every right to do so provided it conforms with the local council's guidelines.

Another port official said the matter had been blown out of proportion by the media, adding that he agreed with Singapore's Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong who had said the issue had been sensationalised.

However, the source said Singapore should disclose the findings of its environmental impact assessment (EIA) for the project to Malaysia.

"This is not to argue about the findings, but Malaysia has a right to learn and carry out its own internal study," said the source.

Dr Nik and Associates Sdn Bhd's principal consultant Datuk Nik Mohd Kamel Nik Hassan, who conducted a study on the tidal effects and impact of land reclamation in the area two years ago, is not convinced that the reclamation will not have an adverse impact on Malaysia.

"The project will pose a serious threat to shipping and the future development of southern Johor," Nik Mohd Kamel told a local daily on Monday.

He said the result of the island's expansion will choke the Johor Strait and change tidal and seabed profiles.

"Among the effects of the reclamation will be an increase in the water current by twice its existing speed of 0.7 metres per second, posing navigational risks to ships arriving and leaving Pasir Gudang Port," he was quoted as saying.

Nik Mohd Kamel said that as a result of the bottleneck caused by the narrow channel and swifter flow of water, ships using the waterway may face the risk of running aground.

"The width of the channel which is of concern now is 1.5 nautical miles (1.8km) and this will be reduced by half after the land reclamation," he said.

Meanwhile, the Johor Port Authority's general manager Mohd Rozali Mohd Ali said on Sunday that the movements of ships calling at the port had been affected.

"The uncontrolled movements of barges carrying sand for the reclamation work at Pulau Tekong has affected traffic, particularly in the Johor Port area," he said.

He added that there had been instances when barges carrying sand almost collided with ships heading for the port.

"We've also found that the shipping lane to the Pasir Gudang Port is becoming narrower," he said.

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