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On developed State track

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ALOR STAR, Tues. - After Kedah Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Syed Razak Syed Zain presented the 2002 State Budget and economic targets last year, a sceptical opposition attempted to rudely laugh him off.

Kedah aims to become a developed State 10 years ahead of the national aspiration of Vision 2020, and they were not confident the State Government would meet the targets within the time frame stipulated.

With a population of 1.6 million and a land area comprising a mere 2.86 per cent (9,426 sq km) of the country's total, the opposition pointed out how it was impossible for Kedah to achieve the targeted 10 to 15 per cent annual GDP growth rate until 2010.

Undeterred, Syed Razak, who conceptualised the plan to make Kedah a developed State, patiently explained how such growth rates were achievable, based on the strong performance figures so far.

Kedah had, after all, recorded a 9.6 per cent GDP average growth rate for the past 10 years, which is higher than the national average of 8.7 per cent.

To support double-digit growth figures till the end of the decade, however, the State would among other things need to pull in huge amounts of foreign direct investment, an average of RM1 billion annually until 2010.

Such high targets are being consistently met, with Kedah reportedly drawing in RM900 million in FDIs last year and this year's figure already surpassing the RM1 billion mark.

In addition, per capita income will have to record US\$4,000 (RM15,200) by 2010, an almost six-fold jump in a 20-year period from 1990 when the figure stood at RM2,612.

The State's performance figures show it is on the right track. Per capita income in 2000 increased to RM4,317.50, and poverty levels have fallen from 30 per cent in the past decade to 13.5 per cent.

Kedah will also need masses of knowledge-based workers, who will have to comprise 50 per cent of the State's workforce.

To meet such specialised labour needs, 50 per cent of the State's population of university-going age would have to be enrolled in institutions of higher learning.

The State has earmarked the establishment of no fewer than five new institutions of technical and higher learning, namely the Asian Institute of Medicine, Science and Technology in Merbok; the Kedah Agriculture University in Kubang Pasu; Universiti Islam Kedah, here; the Malaysian Construction Academy in Sintok and the Matriculation College in Changlun.

They are part of the 110 development projects propelling the Kedah Maju 2010 Action Plan launched by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad on Sept 21 last year.

These projects include massive infrastructural undertakings such as the construction of a RM600.5 million dual-carriage Trans Eastern Hinter-land Highway from Durian Burung to Kulim; a new dam in Beris, Sik; and various new townships and tourism-related projects.

To ensure that the targets continue to be met, the State Government will hold a convention on Kedah Maju 2010 beginning tomorrow.

The convention, to be held at the Dewan Seri Negeri in Wisma Darul Aman here, is scheduled to be officiated by Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

