

14 FEB 2003

Mahathir-Bridge

M'SIA TO PROCEED WITH CONSTRUCTION OF BRIDGE TO REPLACE THE CAUSEWAY

JOHOR BAHRU, Feb 14 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today that Malaysia will proceed with the construction of a new bridge to replace the Causeway on the Johor side despite the lack of cooperation from Singapore.

He said that Singapore's Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew had been informed of the construction of the 25 metre-high bridge at a four-eye meeting some time ago.

"I've spoken privately with Lee Kuan Yew on the intention to replace the Causeway with a higher bridge so that ships can sail through under it.

"I've shown him the plan of the very beautiful bridge designed by Gerbang Perdana," he said in his address at a goodwill gathering in conjunction with the ground-breaking of the integrated south gateway project and a public housing project here.

Gerbang Perdana is the developer which undertook the customs, immigration and quarantine centre project in Tanjung Puteri.

Dr Mahathir said that he had shown Lee the plan and the design of the swing bridge with its unique features and he was very impressed.

He said that Lee was taken in with the project and to him it indicated a possibility of cooperation with Singapore on its implementation.

However, he said, he was informed by Lee that Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong was not in favour of the project.

"Because he has a sense of nostalgia over the Causeway. He (Lee) said that we (Malaysia and Singapore) can construct the bridge after Goh Chok Tong's retirement...this is what he (Lee) told me," he said.

Dr Mahathir said that he had then impressed upon Lee that even without Singapore's cooperation, Malaysia would proceed with the construction of the bridge on the Johor side.

"We cannot wait, we'll have to proceed with it first, if they don't wish to do it on their side, we'll construct on our side," he said, adding that the number of vehicles using the Causeway had continued to increase even though the second Malaysia-Singapore link (Linkedua) had been constructed as an alternative route.

Dr Mahathir said that the design of the swing-bridge was rather unusual as the stretch on the Johor side was rather short.

He said that the bridge had to be built in a slight curve instead of straight to enable smooth flow of vehicles besides allowing it to be swung aside to allow ships and boats to pass.

The Prime Minister said that the construction of the new bridge would allow free flow of the Tebrau Straits, which has been blocked following the construction of the Causeway almost 80 years ago, and also the natural flow of the Straits of Melaka.

About 10,000 people attended the gathering. Present were Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohamed Ali, Menteri Besar Datuk Abdul Ghani Othman, Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs Minister Tan Sri Muhyididn Yassin, Works Minister Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu, Youth and Sports Minister Datuk Hishammudin Tun Hussein and Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar.

Dr Mahathir said he had to disclose what he discussed with Lee in a four-eyed meeting so that Malaysia would not be blamed for not informing Singapore of its plans.

He feared that people would misunderstand that Malaysia cannot even cooperate with the republic in the construction of the bridge.

"Normally, I will not tell anyone (what is discussed in a four-eyed meeting) but I've to tell out because people have published my letters... so that people will not say, look, Malaysia is doing a project without even informing us," he said.

Dr Mahathir, who looked very cheerful with the tumultuous welcome accorded to him by the people here, said he also had fond memories of the causeway, which was the route of his motorcycle ride with Dr Siti Hasmah from the republic to here.

He said while studying in Singapore from 1947 to 1952, he came to Johor Baharu often to feel more comfortable as Singapore was already congested then.

Speaking at a press conference later, Dr Mahathir said the integrated south gateway project, which would change the landscape of Johor Baharu as the southern entry point into Malaysia, would cost about RM2 billion.

According to project developer, Gerbang Perdana Sdn Bhd, all components of the project are slated for completion in 2007 but the CIQ complex and the public housing project would be ready much earlier -- in 34 months.

Earlier, when performing the ground-breaking ceremony, Dr Mahathir was visibly moved after smoke bombs were released and sand transporting lorries lifted their carriages displaying the wordings "PERJUANGANMU KAMI TERUSKAN" (We Continue The Struggles).

-- BERNAMA

MNY RAM TS