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CHAN-RAILWAY

SINGAPORE-KUNMING RAILWAY LINK BEGINS TO TAKE SHAPE

PUTRAJAYA, Dec 10 (Bernama) -- The much awaited Singapore-Kunming Railway Link (SKRL) project has begun to take shape with steps taken to fill up the missing rail links at the Thailand-Cambodia-Vietnam stretch, Transport Minister Datuk Seri Chan Kong Choy said today.

Chan, who is the project's special working group (SWG) chairman, said that the biggest challenge of the Asean's flagship infrastructure project covering 5,513km, is the missing rail links.

The minister, who just came back from attending the fifth SWG meeting in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam said that the Thai government has indicated that it would build the shortest missing rail link from the Thai border to Poi Peep, the border town of Cambodia, by the end of next year.

He said that Malaysia has agreed to assist in the construction of the second missing rail link from Poi Peep to Sisophon both in Cambodia, covering a length of 48km by donating used railway tracks from its Rawang-Ipoh double track project by mid next year, he told reporters here today.

Chan said that Malaysia will transport the used rail tracks either by rail via Thailand or by sea and will also send a technical team, led by Keretapi Tanah Melayu Bhd (KTMB), to Cambodia to discuss the details with the country's transport and railway authorities.

He said that the Asian Development Bank (ADB) is also keen in supporting the project and is allocating US\$40 million (US\$1 = RM3.8) of the total cost of US\$65 million, and would source the extra US\$25 million from others.

"However, the money would only be coming in in 2006, and ADB has been asked to relook into its decision so that the funding could come much earlier," he said.

Chan said that the third missing link, which is the longest covering 255km, is between Phnom Penh, Cambodia to Locninh, the border town of Vietnam.

He said that Vietnam has shown keen interest to build the fourth missing link between Locninh and Ho Chi Minh City, covering a distance of 192km and had conducted its own feasibility which would be finalised by the end of this month.

He said that South Korea has also volunteered to conduct a feasibility study on the missing link between Cambodia and Vietnam while China has indicated that it was keen to help.

"Once, the technical details are worked out, we will look into the funding," Chan said.

"We have been talking about this project for more than 10 years and now with something concrete taking place, the SKRL project can become a reality not too long from now," he said.

The railway project, starting in Singapore and would pass through Kuala Lumpur, Bangkok, Ho Chi Minh City, Phnom Penh, Hanoi, Laos, Myanmar before reaching Kunming in China, was mooted by former Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Meanwhile, Malaysia has been re-appointed to chair the SWG working group for another term until 2006.

Chan said that the meeting also agreed to expand its responsibility to include looking for funding. -- BERNAMA

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