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Langkawi-Mahathir (News Focus)

WHAT IS IN STORE FOR LANGKAWI AFTER DR MAHATHIR'S RETIREMENT?

By: Mohd Zahari Morad

LANGKAWI, June 5 (Bernama) -- The retirement of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad this October raises the question of the future of the duty free island of Langkawi.

Will the island of the legendary Mahsuri fame continue to busk in the special attention of the Federal Government or will its future be in doubt after Dr Mahathir bids farewell to the nation as Prime Minister of Malaysia.

This is because Dr Mahathir is seen as the architect of Langkawi's development. He is behind the development of Langkawi from a remote forest clad island to the renowned international tourist resort it is today.

Since Langkawi was accorded free port status in 1987, there has been no letup in the Prime Minister's desire to visit the island and inspect the progress of its development. Moreover the many projects that stand proudly on the island today bear testimony to his many and wide ranging ideas.

Several people do not believe that Langkawi will be neglected as they point out that Dr Mahathir had laid down a very strong foundation which will be the basis for the island's continued progress and development.

Langkawi will be ignored?, Not at all, says Kedah Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Syed Razak Syed Zain. It is a figment of the imagination. Loose talk without any basis.

Dr Mahathir's retirement and Langkawi's development were two different things, he told Bernama recently.

"Its progress will continue even after Dr Mahathir's retirement as the Federal and state governments will continue with Dr Mahathir's agenda for the island's development," he said.

While acknowledging that he had heard people talking about the sun setting over Langkawi after this, Syed Razak was nevertheless convinced that Langkawi would definitely progress as the Prime Minister had laid the groundwork for this.

Langkawi was equipped with various facilities, many other projects were underway while others had been planned and these would make Langkawi even more attractive and draw even greater number of tourists, he said.

Syed Razak, who is also joint Chairman of the Langkawi Development Authority (LADA), said the Federal and state governments will continue to give attention to the island and ensure sufficient allocations to ensure that it remains a foremost tourist destination in the country. (Dr Mahathir, in his capacity as Finance Minister, is also Chairman of Lada)

The Menteri Besar said the people of Langkawi were immensely grateful to Dr Mahathir.

"Without his drive and initiative, Langkawi will have remained a distant field devoid of any development, a backwater. We will definitely seek his advice even after his retirement," he said.

Fully aware of the island's rapid development, Dr Mahathir while performing the ground breaking works for an extension of the Underwater World, at Pantai Cenang in early March, proposed that Langkawi be made the capital of the state of Kedah Darul Aman.

While many felt that the statement was not a serious policy proposition by the Prime Minister, they were agreed that after careful consideration it meant that no one should ignore Langkawi in the future.

Since being accorded free port status, development had been rapid on the island with much investment inflow. Various projects are rapidly taking

shape such as five-star international class hotels, cable car projects, marina for yachts at Panti Kok, oriental settlement and others.

Langkawi has also emerged as the venue for international level events, of which the two prominent ones are the biennial Langkawi International Maritime and Aerospace Exhibition (LIMA) and the Langkawi International Dialogue (LID) which brings together renowned leaders from various African and other countries.

The Langkawi Tourist Association (LTA), remains confident that the Federal and state governments will not leave the island in the lurch particularly after so much money had been pumped in for its development.

LTA President, IM Melvin said Dr Mahathir had tirelessly worked for its development and had laid the foundation and built on it and what was necessary now was to continue with the agenda.

"I am sure Langkawi will continue to develop rapidly and the government will continue to pay attention to it," said Melvin who is also General Manager of Tanjung Rhu Resort, one of the many international standard resorts that dot the island.

The LTA counts as its members, 45 companies comprising tour agencies, hotel operators, restaurateurs, traders and tourist guides working on the island.

Melvin said Langkawi's attractions included its scenic beauty and beautiful beaches, a plus point for drawing tourists and its status as a shopping haven.

"To ensure tourists keep coming, we have to maintain the island's scenic beauty and go for more aggressive promotion. If we can do that we can see many more visitors from West Asia, East Asia and Europe."

"We have to be thankful to Dr Mahathir for stressing the need to preserve the island's priceless treasure...its natural beauty," Melvin said.

The LTA is actively promoting Langkawi overseas in collaboration with the Langkawi Tourism Action Council with a view to bringing in more tourists.

Protem President of the Langkawi Duty Free Shop Traders Association Arshad Desa said Dr Mahathir's great work should be continued so that neglect would not set in.

"We very much hope that the Federal Government will continue to build upon what has been achieved so far. If there is neglect, what will become of the tourist operators and businessmen who had invested heavily here," he said.

President of the Rented and Hired Cars Association Yusof Abdullah said Langkawi's development would not be affected as the Prime Minister's successor would continue from where Dr Mahathir had left off.

Senior government leaders and officers should continue with Dr Mahathir's efforts as this would show that they appreciated the Prime Minister's tireless contributions towards Langkawi's wellbeing, he said.

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