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Johor hopes for decision on bridge soon

By Ravi Nambiar; Azlan Abu Bakar

JOHOR BARU, Wed. - Johor hopes the new leaders in Singapore will make a decision soon on Malaysia's request that the republic agree to jointly build a straight bridge across the Tebrau Strait to replace the present Causeway.

Menteri Besar Datuk Abdul Ghani Othman, who extended the State's best wishes to Prime Minister-designate Lee Hsien Loong and his Cabinet, said it was imperative that work on the bridge start soon.

"Work is nearing completion on the new Customs, Immigration and Quarantine (CIQ) complex in Johor Baru. If construction of the bridge does not start soon, the CIQ complex is in danger of becoming a white elephant," he said after chairing the weekly state executive council meeting at the State Secretariat at Bukit Timbalan today.

He hoped the change of leaders in Singapore would spell a new lease of life for the bridge project, work on which had come to a complete standstill.

"While the contractor has been working feverishly to complete the CIQ complex by 2007, no work is being done on the bridge.

"If the bridge is not completed on time, the new CIQ complex will become useless and we will have a hard time explaining to the people," he said.

Ghani said that a delay in the completion of the project would also retard Johor's plans to put in place a modern and efficient traffic disposal system for Johor Baru.

"Every time there is an extended weekend holiday in Singapore, Johor Baru is jam-packed with Singapore-registered cars as the people there make a beeline to holiday destinations in Johor and elsewhere in Malaysia.

"This also happens on their return trips as all roads leading to the Causeway and the Second Link are packed with cars.

"This is all the more reason why the CIQ and new bridge must be completed and opened to motorists as scheduled by 2007," he said.

He added that Johor was eager to make travel to Malaysia for visitors from Singapore convenient and hassle-free.

Former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad mooted the idea of replacing the Causeway with a bridge when he visited Johor in July 1996.

When the water issue was separated from the package of issues negotiated between Malaysia and Singapore in October 2002, Singapore called off its plans for the new bridge.

Malaysia then opted to go it alone by building a curved "half-bridge".

Singapore later said it was willing to work with Malaysia on the new bridge, but only if it was included in a package of bilateral issues to be discussed.

Singapore's Deputy Prime Minister Dr Tony Tan was quoted as saying last year that the republic was willing to discuss the idea.

"I look at this as a game where Singapore and Malaysia can co-operate, both of us will benefit and that is the stuff of the win-win solution we are looking for," Dr Tan was quoted as saying.

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