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Johor unwilling to drop bridge project

MUAR, Mon. - Johor will strongly resist any move to abandon the proposed bridge to replace the Causeway, Menteri Besar Datuk Abdul Ghani Othman made it clear today.

He said the question of "dropping the bridge" did not arise because this was not the position of Umno Johor or the State Government.

"The construction of the bridge will proceed as planned. We will be very firm on this," he told reporters after a briefing on Ninth Malaysia Plan development projects for the Muar district.

Ghani was responding to a suggestion by the Member of Parliament for Johor Baru Datuk Shahrir Abdul Samad, who floated the idea yesterday that Malaysia drop the bridge project to make it easier for Singapore to resolve outstanding bilateral issues with Malaysia.

Singapore has yet to give its nod for the proposed elevated bridge to replace the existing Causeway, although Malaysia is ready with the design and raring to go with construction.

When the idea was first mooted by former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, a straight bridge was initially proposed. But when Singapore started to drag its feet, Dr Mahahir had suggested that a "crooked bridge" covering the Malaysian side of the Johor Strait be built instead.

However, when Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi took office, he refloated the idea of a straight bridge, saying such a project would be a lasting legacy of good neighbourly relations between Malaysia and Singapore.

Ironically, Shahrir had also supported the call for a straight bridge early last year.

But yesterday, the backbencher unexpectedly changed his stance, saying dropping the plan to build the bridge would enable Malaysia and Singapore to focus on more pressing matters.

Shahrir had also suggested that Malaysia terminate its rail service to Singapore and give up its claim to land in Tanjung Pagar in the republic.

The land in question, located in the centre of a major commercial hub in Singapore, is reportedly worth in excess of S\$500 million (RM1.16 billion) at current market prices.

"I don't think we should be holding on to this land merely because of its commercial value," he was quoted as saying.

Ghani, saying that nobody should make the bridge an issue, stressed that "whether it is a straight or crooked bridge, construction will proceed as planned. There can be no two ways about it," he said.

Ghani said it was also the hope and aspiration of the people of Johor that the causeway be demolished to make way for a new bridge.

He did not understand why Shahrir was stirring up a controversy now when he (Shahrir) had voted to go ahead with the project in Umno Johor.

Shahrir's views on the matter was prompted by a remark by Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak, who told reporters after a closed-door meeting with Umno Johor leaders in Johor Baru on Saturday, that the Federal Government was still open to feedback from Johor on the on-going Malaysia-Singapore talks.

In Putrajaya, Najib, when asked to comment on Shahrir's suggestion, said the Government would take note of views and suggestions from all parties on a new bridge to replace the Causeway to Singapore.

He said it was a matter between Governments and that they were still in discussion.

In Kuala Lumpur, Works Minister Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu said construction of the bridge involved the two Governments.

He said the bridge was needed to overcome congestion and improve cleanliness of the environment.

(END) Source : New Straits Times