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PM: Speed up work on Kedah CIQ complex

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KUALA NERANG, Tues. - Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad wants work on the Durian Burung Customs, Immigration and Quarantine (CIQ) complex at the Kedah-Thailand border here to be expedited.

Dr Mahathir pointed out that the Thais had already built a road from Songkhla to the area immediately beyond the CIQ while local developers have yet to build an access road on the Malaysian side of the border.

"They (the Thais) are ready and have built a road from Songkhla to this border area, but we have not built any road ... so we have to expedite (our efforts)," said Dr Mahathir.

He was speaking after checking on progress at the CIQ complex today.

Dr Mahathir, who arrived at the Sultan Abdul Halim airport in Alor Star this morning, boarded a helicopter to survey the surrounding area here with Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Syed Razak Syed Zain.

Landing at the Royal Malay Regiment's Camp Sahara post near the site, Dr Mahathir was then briefed on the project's progress by representatives of the developer, Northern Integrated Agriculture Sdn Bhd.

The company is a joint venture between the Kedah Economic Development Corporation and Gerak Masyur Sdn Bhd, which is under the Bukhary Group.

Asked whether he had set a time-frame for the completion of the CIQ earlier than the late 2004 deadline cited by the developer, Dr Mahathir said he wanted the CIQ to open "as soon as possible".

The RM130 million CIQ complex is being built on a 15.48-hectare site. When completed, it will be the second land border checkpoint between Kedah and Thailand. The current one is at Bukit Kayu Hitam.

The decision to create the new gateway was reached in August last year when the Thai Government agreed to Malaysia's proposal for the location of the checkpoint.

The nearest Thai town is Ban Prakop, about 4.2km away.

The CIQ complex is the centrepiece of development here.

Kota Putra, a new township, is also being developed near the CIQ complex, approximately 68km from Alor Star.

The township, to be built on a 1,014.4-hectare site, is also being developed by Northern Integrated Agriculture Sdn Bhd.

A RM300 million highway, known as the Kedah Trans-Eastern Highway, will connect the CIQ complex and Kota Putra to Kupang in Baling.

Motorists can continue from there to the East-West highway or the North-South Expressway.

The Kedah Trans-Eastern Highway is slated for completion in 2005.

Dr Mahathir said the development of Kota Putra should be in stages and in moderation.

"I suggest we don't build such beautiful buildings here in the early stages, but create facilities in moderation.

"This will lessen costs, because the cost to build the CIQ is not that large, and even the award of the highway contract has not been fully settled yet."

Dr Mahathir said the CIQ, Kota Putra and the Kedah Trans-Eastern Highway were needed to spur development in the eastern side of the State, which was still lagging compared to other parts of Kedah.

Durian Burung and Kota Putra are situated in Padang Terap district, whose 67,000 residents have an average monthly income of RM670 per household.

Dr Mahathir said in order for the plan to work, a pull factor (daya penarik) was needed to bring back the many youths in the area who had migrated elsewhere.

"If not, many of the younger generation from this area will seek employment elsewhere, and this place will gradually become empty."

Dr Mahathir said in order to develop the area and increase the number of residents, there were plans to promote certain industries in Kota Putra, such as integrated farming with various types of fruits and plants.

"We also have the sugar industry here, with the local sugar factory able to serve nearby factories that will be built; these will be small canneries and others that will be involved in food preservation."

During his aerial survey of the area, Dr Mahathir was also shown bamboo "forests" located in the nearby Chebar Besar forest reserve.

Dr Mahathir said there were plans to utilise the bamboo to generate income for local residents.

"This area has a lot of bamboo which can be used to make a lot of things, including chopsticks.

"So we may have a joint venture with the Japanese to develop the bamboo industry here.

"From the bamboo supply, we hope to be able to create a 'one-village-one-product' industry here."

Dr Mahathir later visited the RM26 million Kuala Kedah Marina Harbour project due for completion next month.

He spent 45 minutes touring the newly-completed clubhouse designed to resemble an ancient European fort with its eight towers, parapet and a moat.

The club will have facilities such as a banquet hall, coffee house, boat sales offices, meeting rooms, a pool, and will be able to accommodate 44 sailboats of up to 30 metres in length.

Located on a 16-hectare site, the project is being developed by LCC Usahasama Sdn Bhd while BF Infra Sdn Bhd serves as the turnkey contractor.

Dr Mahathir then had lunch with his two elder sisters, Rafeah, 90, Habsah, 85, and other relatives at the house of his niece Datin Yasmin Mashahor, situated in Jalan Pegawai, Alor Star.

The Prime Minister later visited his personal residence in nearby Titi Gajah before returning to Kuala Lumpur.