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Bintulu set to be 'new-age' urban oasis of Sarawak

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PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad will make a second visit to Bintulu soon for the commissioning of the Malaysia LNG Tiga plant which will make Bintulu the largest single liquefied natural gas plant in the world.

Dr Mahathir was in Bintulu earlier this year to officiate at the opening of the Bintulu Airport.

This airport is a mark of special pride for Sarawak as its main contractor is from Sarawak. The airport was also completed in record time.

Bintulu's metamorphosis from a humble fishing village into a burgeoning boomtown came about with the discovery of natural gas off-shore in the 70s.

The completion of the Malaysia LNG Satu plant and a dedicated seaport in the early 80s marked the first spurt of growth for Bintulu. Bintulu's original population of some thirty-thousand, has since quadrupled.

Bintulu Port has prospered by leaps and bounds on the back of its role as the down-loading point for liquefied natural gas destined for Japan and South Korea.

With foresight and imagination, the port's management has been able to parlay its initial success into converting itself into a general-use port with state-of-the-art equipment to handle containerised cargo.

It is making a determined effort to position itself as the transshipment hub for the Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines-East Asean Growth Area (BIMP-EAGA), a sub-region with a market base of almost 50 million people.

The completion of MLNG Tiga will not be the end of Bintulu's projected growth. The construction of the Bakun Dam and the building of an aluminium smelter plant, both within the vicinity of Bintulu, will help ensure Bintulu remains the centre of economic gravity in Sarawak well into 2010.

With the completion of the new airport, the lament that the amount of economic opportunities Bintulu has generated for the country has not brought about a commensurate investment in modern infrastructure for the town, will be largely blunted.

The town now also boasts a state-of-the-art hospital and a university campus.

Restaurants and entertainment outlets in new shopping centres catering to local residents with deeper pockets than the average Sarawakian and the small army of expatriate workers are beginning to give Bintulu a distinctive cosmopolitan air.

Bintulu is a township virtually built from scratch. Wooden shophouses alongside the Sungai Kemena in what used to be the original town centre have almost all disappeared.

The location of the old airport parallel to the town centre had hampered the growth of the original town centre.

So the town spread out into neatly laid-out and self-contained suburbs. The parcel of land where the old airport now stands represents a unique opportunity for the town's planners to create an entirely new central business district for Bintulu.

It is an opportunity which the Bintulu Development Authority - the one-stop Government agency which oversees all aspects of the town's development - looks like it will handle with great care.

For on this may well hinge the future development of Bintulu, not just

into the mega industrial and shipping hub of the East Asean archipelago but a "new-age" urban oasis which will become the natural magnet for the people of an increasingly urbanised Sarawak.