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Bridge to replace Causeway (HL)

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PUTRAJAYA, Fri. - Malaysia will not involve Singapore in the construction of the RM1 billion land and rail bridge that will replace the Causeway, but has guaranteed the republic of continued water supply.

Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today that Singapore's involvement would only serve to delay the project which had to be redesigned leading to a "crooked bridge".

"No. That (Singapore's involvement) will delay the project. I think we don't want to involve Singapore in this," the Prime Minister said at a Press conference after witnessing the signing of the memorandum of understanding between the Public Works Department (representing the Government) and Gerbang Perdana Sdn Bhd for the construction of the project.

The project, involving the building of a new Customs, Immigration and Quarantine (CIQ) complex and an elevated 31.5-kilometre bridge, is scheduled to be completed by Dec 31, 2005.

He had been asked if Malaysia was still open to Singapore's participation in the project.

Dr Mahathir said Kuala Lumpur had initially proposed the idea to the republic, but had failed to receive a favourable response.

"We are forced to build a crooked bridge. It was supposed to be a straight one replacing the Causeway, but since our proposal had failed to receive a favourable response from the other side, and since the Causeway is nostalgic and maybe we could only start the project in 2007, we have to go on with it on our own. We saw it heading in the same direction as the water dispute," Dr Mahathir said.

He said that rather than a protracted discussion which may not yield anything positive, the Government had chosen to go ahead with the project by redesigning the bridge.

"So we have to build a crooked bridge. That's our fate. We can't get co-operation from the people, so we have to accept. This is how we solve problems."

During the ground-breaking ceremony of the project in Johor Baru on Feb 14, Dr Mahathir had revealed that the proposal to replace the Causeway had been shot down by Singapore Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew.

He had stated that Lee had reasoned that Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong had nostalgic attachment to the Causeway and that any plan to remove the link could only be carried out when Goh leaves office in 2007.

"It is not that we are not co-operative. Actually, I had spoken to (Singapore Senior Minister) Lee Kuan Yew at our private meeting when he came to see me and he seemed very pleased with the idea.

"I gave him the map, plan and the design of the proposed elevated bridge. But later he wrote to me and mentioned again during his meeting with me that even though he was keen to have the elevated bridge constructed, (Prime Minister) Goh Chok Tong was opposed to the idea because the Causeway was nostalgic to him.

"This was in a meeting between us. Normally, I don't reveal such meetings... no one knows until today but I have to tell the truth today because even my letters have been published. So I'll have to set the record straight so that people don't blame us for not co-operating with Singapore.

"Initially, I was happy (based on Lee's initial response), thinking that

we could co-operate and build the bridge, but according to Lee, his Prime Minister was nostalgic about the Causeway. So he suggested that we should start the project after Goh leaves office," Dr Mahathir had stated.

Gerbang Perdana is 60 per cent owned by Merong Mahawangsa Sdn Bhd, a wholly-owned subsidiary of Ibex Corp Amalgamated, 20 per cent owned by Diversified Resources Bhd and 20 per cent owned by Transwater Corp Bhd's Detik Nagasari Sdn Bhd.

Dr Mahathir, who is also Finance Minister, said that by partly removing the Causeway, water would be able to flow freely in the Straits of Johor, contributing towards the improvement of marine life and the environment in general.

He said that boats or vessels less than 25 metres in height could also ply the straits, thus enabling the movement of cargo between the ports of Pasir Gudang and Port of Tanjung Pelepas (PTP).

"Now it's closed (the straits). We only have two tiny culverts underneath but they are not serving a purpose. With the removal of the Causeway, water will then flow through and boats not above 25m height can cross from east to west and vice versa. It will also facilitate, probably, the movement of some cargo from Pasir Gudang to PTP if it's worthwhile to do so," he said.

On the water issue, he said Kuala Lumpur would refer the case for arbitration instead of engaging in further talks or negotiations with Singapore.

The Prime Minister said Malaysia could not afford to be bogged by the delay in resolving the dispute.

"We go forward. I think the period of talking and negotiating is now over. We want to have arbitration. According to the provisions of the agreement, if there is a dispute that cannot be settled then we go for arbitration," he said in response to questions on the deadlocked water pricing dispute.

He said that while Malaysia would continue supplying Singapore with water as stipulated in the two agreements signed with the Singapore City Council in 1961 and 1962, the pricing of the commodity would have to be reviewed accordingly.

To a question, Dr Mahathir said that the Federal Government's intention to take over the management of water resources from State Governments had no bearing on the water agreement with Singapore.

He reiterated that Kuala Lumpur would continue to supply Singaporeans with water.

"We have promised and we will honour our word," he said.

Dr Mahathir also touched on the need for contractors to provide professional and quality service, and not opt for quick profit by selling their projects.

He warned that although he might not be the Prime Minister during the scheduled completion of the project in 2005, he would still turn up to inspect the "bridge".

"We don't want to be forced to pay the sub-contractors directly by the Government. We hope that the principal contractors will manage the money that they get properly and, of course, since PWD has now advertised itself as a very efficient and up-to-date organisation, I hope not a single sen will be lost and, right on the dot, I expect to cross this bridge... if I'm still alive then. I'll be more than 80 at that time, so I may need a tongkat (walking stick).

"I'll be there with my tongkat, if I can't use the tongkat to help me walk (on the bridge), I'll use the tongkat on the people who built the bridge," he said in jest.

On the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) rate for the year, he said 4.5 per

cent was achievable as the second quarter growth figure was expected to be better than expected earlier.

"I think second quarter should be good, should be better than what we expect. A 4.5 per cent (GDP growth) is achievable unless you have got some other diseases or war. These are unpredictable things. If everything else remain as they are, we should achieve 4.5 per cent GDP growth," the Prime Minister said.

Dr Mahathir said earlier projections were thrown off-track due to the impact of the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome outbreak which devastated the economies of East Asian nations.

"At that time, when we were budgeting for this year (2003), we did not anticipate SARS although we were anticipating the Iraq war. But as you know, SARS has affected our performance, as much as it has affected the performance of most countries in East Asia. But we are not as badly off as some other countries," he said Also present at the signing ceremony were Works Minister Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu, Transport Minister Datuk Chan Kong Choy, Second Finance Minister Datuk Dr Jamaludin Jarjis, Johor Menteri Besar Datuk Abdul Ghani Othman, Public Works Department director-general Tan Sri Zaini Omar, Gerbang Perdana chairman Tan Sri Razali Ismail and Gerbang Perdana managing director Datuk Yahya Jalil.