

17/02/2003

Malaysia to go ahead with bridge project under revised plan

Sharif Haron

PETALING JAYA, Sun. - If only the Singaporeans realised the opportunity that was lost when their Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong rejected Malaysia's original proposal to replace the Causeway.

The proposal of a new bridge impressed Singapore Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew, but not Goh, who was apparently sentimental about the nearly eight-decade-old Causeway and did not want it demolished, at least not yet.

The beautiful bridge design aside, the original proposal also included two 75m-wide navigational channels, one each on either side of the international boundary to promote maritime activities such as pleasure boating. This would further promote the tourism industry, and development of related industries.

And as the entire Causeway was to be demolished, the reintroduction of natural tide and sea current would better flush and dilute the waterway of pollutants, improve water quality and propagate marine life.

Under the original plan, the Causeway was to be replaced by a bridge spanning about one kilometre linking a new Customs, Immigration and Quarantine (CIQ) complex in Johor Baru and the Woodlands CIQ, with 780m of the bridge over the Straits of Johor.

Malaysia is now going ahead with replacing the Causeway under a revised plan, albeit limited to only the Malaysian side. The project itself has been renamed Gerbang Selatan Bersepadu or Southern Integrated Gateway, instead of the original Southern International Gateway.

The ground-breaking of the project, being undertaken by Gerbang Perdana Sdn Bhd, was officiated by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad in Johor Baru last Friday.

Gerbang Perdana is a consortium comprising Merong Mahawangsa Sdn Bhd (60 per cent), DRB-HICOM Bhd (20 per cent) and Detik Nagasari Sdn Bhd, a wholly-owned subsidiary of Transwater Corporation Bhd (20 per cent).

In his speech on Friday, Dr Mahathir said it looked weird that the construction of the new elevated bridge would only be confined to the Malaysian side, while the old structure on Singapore's side would remain.

Stressing it was not that Malaysia was not co-operative, Dr Mahathir said he had spoken to Senior Minister Lee at a private meeting and he seemed very pleased with the idea.

"But later he wrote to me and mentioned again during his following four-eyed meeting with me that even though he was keen to have the elevated bridge constructed, Goh Chok Tong was opposed to the idea because the Causeway was nostalgic to him (Goh)."

Dr Mahathir said Malaysia had more reasons, including the rising traffic volume, to build an expanded elevated bridge sooner rather than to wait for "nostalgic" feelings to subside, thus Kuala Lumpur was going ahead with the project on its own, and confined to its territory.

He added Malaysia had no illintentions, but had to ensure that certain factors were in the best interest of the nation, and the people of Johor.

Gerbang Perdana Sdn Bhd executive vice-chairman/managing director Datuk Yahya A. Jalil said today that the company had considered Singapore's interests when coming up with the first proposal, including the fact that the Johor Straits was heavily polluted.

"In the first design, we even looked at interfacing it with the Woodlands CIQ. There would be no problem with regards to interfacing.

"Singapore would also be better off with the first design as two navigational channels were proposed. Now we (Malaysia) will be the only one having a navigational channel," Yahya said at the Gerbang Perdana office here.

Yahya said he did have regrets that the first design was not agreeable to Singapore.

The Causeway was officially opened in 1924. It was adequate then, but no longer so in catering to the increasing traffic volume.

In July 1996, Dr Mahathir announced that a new bridge would be built to replace the Causeway. Since then, Gerbang Perdana had been developing a proposal to replace Causeway with a bridge and redevelop existing CIQ facilities including improvement to the existing road networks in Johor Baru central business district.

Subsequent to the Letter of Exclusivity from the Economic Planning unit (EPU) in the Prime Minister's Department in June, 1998, Gerbang Perdana submitted a privatisation proposal for the Southern International Gateway project to EPU in December 1999.

In November 2001, the Government directed Gerbang Perdana to consider an alternative proposal and with this, the Gerbang Selatan Bersepadu project came into existence.