

Singapore, M'sia push back deadline for fast rail link

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By Reuters

Singapore and Malaysia have decided to push back an initial deadline of 2020 for the completion of a high-speed rail link between the wealthy city state and Kuala Lumpur, their prime ministers said today, citing the complexity of the project.

The South-East Asian neighbours said they hoped to reach agreement by the end of the year on a new timeline for the railway link, which will cut travel time between the cities to 90 minutes.

"We looked at the original timeline of 2020, and think it is not really realistic," Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong told a news conference, adding that the project was very challenging to carry out.

"We have to take a bit more time to do it well, but to do it without delay."

Singapore and Malaysia set a completion date of 2020 when they announced plans for the high-speed rail link in February 2013, but gave no estimate of the project cost.

Hailed at the time as a major breakthrough by some analysts, the announcement reflected an improvement in ties between the neighbours. Singapore was once part of Malaysia but they separated acrimoniously in 1965, clouding diplomatic and economic dealings for decades.

Today, Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak said construction of the link with the Malaysian capital would take five years, design one year and the tendering process another year.

"We both decided that bilateral issues pertaining to the high-speed rail project will be settled by the end of the year," Najib said. These issues covered management, the business model and government participation, he added.

Lee said the Singapore terminus of the high-speed rail link would be in Jurong East, a western part of the island that the government has been keen to develop.

Malaysia has proposed a route running through five coastal cities for its portion of the line, the country's Land Public Transport Commission says on its website.

Railway companies in Japan and China have been eager to play a role in the project. China wants to help build a Malaysia-Singapore high-speed rail link, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang said last November.

It now takes about four hours to drive from Singapore to Kuala Lumpur, a distance of

around 300km.

A flight takes around 50 minutes, but airport formalities add to the time taken, besides a one-hour bus ride from KL International Airport to the city centre.

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