

PM: We took into account the people's sentiments

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KUALA LUMPUR: The Cabinet has scrapped plans to build the proposed new bridge across the Johor Straits, to replace the Causeway.

The decision was made after negative public sentiments following Singapore's condition that Malaysia supply the republic with sand and allow it the use of Johor airspace.

Yesterday's Cabinet meeting, after lengthy discussions on the issue which has dragged on for more than seven years, decided to stop all negotiations with the island republic on the bridge issue and defer to public sentiment.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, in a statement, said:

"The Government's decision was made after taking into account the voices and sentiments of the Malaysian people, especially on the supply of sand and airspace."

Singapore had objected to the construction of the bridge and had sent protest notes to the Malaysian Government.

Malaysia, however, initially decided to pursue with the plan to build the bridge within its own waters after attempts at negotiations failed to find a resolution.

At a Press conference after leading the National Implementation Task Force on a visit to the Rural and Regional Development Ministry in Putrajaya later, Abdullah described the Cabinet's decision as a "political decision" made after considering all angles and listening to the views of the people.

"This is a political decision and the matter was discussed thoroughly at the Cabinet level. We have considered everything in detail and discussed whether future negotiations (on the project) should be held.

"The people's sentiments were also considered. Many of them have expressed unhappiness over the conditions imposed (by Singapore).

"It is important for the Government to listen as whatever we do should be for their benefit. This is one issue that can result in misunderstandings and conflicts. So, there is no point for us to continue



Abdullah with Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak at the Press conference.

the project."

Bernama quoted Abdullah as saying the decision was also made because of its legal implications and complications.

"Problems will arise when we have to cut the Causeway, the water pipes and railway track and connect them to the new bridge. The problems will continue," he said.

It is understood that the Cabinet was briefed on legal opinions on the agreement to build the original Causeway.

The view was that either way — straight bridge or "scenic" bridge — the consent of both countries was needed before the Causeway could be demolished to make way for the new bridge.

"Even if we were to build the crooked bridge on our side, we would have to get Singapore's consent before we even touch one brick of the Causeway to link it to the bridge," one source said.

"What would happen if we had gone through the process and built the crooked bridge and Singapore demanded that before we linked it to the Causeway, they wanted the same conditions: sand and airspace?"

"Either way, the new bridge would come at that same cost and we cannot compromise on our sovereignty. The best decision was to scrap the bridge altogether," the source said.

Asked whether Singapore pressured Malaysia to scrap the bridge, Abdullah said even Singapore was not aware that Malaysia

would come to the decision.

"George Yeo (Singapore Foreign Minister) has been informed and he was surprised.

"We are not pressured by anybody. We think of what our people want.

"If they don't want, there is no need to go ahead ... there will be a lot of problems. What's the point? I have decided to listen to the people. I know for a fact that the majority of the people are very happy (with the decision).

"This is a very serious matter and we must know the feeling of the people, whether it is not good, not right.

"It is the Government of the people, for the people, by the people. (If) they are not prepared to accept (the conditions), (there is) no need to force. There are other issues that we should be giving attention to," he said.

He also said bilateral ties with Singapore would not be affected. "Ties between the two countries do not depend on the bridge. It is not the bridge that can solve bilateral problems between us. Our ties do not focus just on one issue but plenty of other matters. This is just one issue."

Abdullah said compensation of RM100 million would be paid to Gerbang Perdana, the contractor of the project.

There were other projects in Johor that could be implemented by Gerbang Perdana. "Johor, especially southern Johor, is poised to become a new development hub for the southern corridor."

Singapore surprised at move

SINGAPORE: Singapore is surprised at Malaysia's decision to scrap its plan for a bridge to replace the Causeway linking the two countries.

"We are surprised at this sudden decision when negotiations for a full bridge were ongoing," a Foreign Ministry spokesman said in a one-paragraph statement to *Bernama*. The statement followed Malaysia's announcement that it was not proceeding with the bridge project.

Officers from both countries had met five times since September to negotiate on Malaysia's proposal that the 81-year-old Causeway be replaced with a bridge, with each country bearing the cost of construction on their side.

The republic was, however, reluctant to participate in the project, citing the huge financial costs with no benefits for Singapore.

It had said it would agree to the bridge if there were a balance of benefits for both sides.