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BINTULU: The Pan Borneo Highway will be toll-free, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Abdul Razak said yesterday.

It would be the main artery connecting Sarawak and Sabah and there is no alternative route between the two states, he said.

This is unlike the case in Peninsular Malaysia where the North-South Expressway (NSE) is the main link and there are many alternative routes, he said when launching the first phase of the highway, the Pan Borneo Sarawak, costing RM13 billion.

Najib said toll is imposed on the NSE but the people can choose to use the toll-free alternative routes.

He said subsequent phases of the Pan Borneo Highway will be carried out this year, with the next launch expected

in September.

The highway will not only improve Sarawak's infrastructure but also open up economic opportunities for the people, he said, adding the project will bring long-term benefits to the people and is not a mega project that drains public funds.

The whole highway, which will cost RM27 billion, involves the construction and upgrading of 1,663km of road in Sarawak and Sabah.

The first phase of the project in Sarawak involves the construction of 919km of a single carriageway from Tanjung Datu to Sematan and a dual carriageway from Sematan to MerapoL The first phase of 43km from Nyabau to Bakun is expected to be completed at the end of 2017, followed by the

Tanjung Datu-Sematan-Miri-Limbang-Lawas stretch that is expected to be ready in mid-2023.

Speaking at a media conference later, he said the highway's construction will be implemented on the private-public partnership concept, which minimises risks besides ensuring the implementation cost does not escalate.

Najib also handed over the letter of commitment on the Development Funds to 75 selected contracting companies belonging to locals involved in highway construction.

He said what is emphasised in the project is that it must involve contractors, consultants and sub-contractors from the various ethnic groups in Sarawak.

He also said the highway is important in terms of the security aspect because the land route is the safest mode of transport.