



17/12/2008 (Wednesday)

Board expects tithe collection to fall

SHAH ALAM: The Selangor Zakat Board (LZS) has projected a lower tithe collection next year due to the economic slowdown expected to affect the earnings of companies and individuals.

Selangor Islamic Religious Council's (Mais) chairman Datuk Setia Mohamad Adzib Mohd Isa said, however, that the board was still expected to collect more than RM200 million, next year, as many of the tithe payers have a fixed income.

"The economic slowdown would affect the collection but it would not be too bad as there are many promising companies and individual contributors with fixed income and savings," he said after receiving RM7.2 million in business tithe (zakat perniagaan) and launching zakat@one pay, a zakat payment system using automated teller machines (ATM) at all Petronas stations in Selangor, here, yesterday.

Adzib said that so far, the LZS had collected more than RM180 million and would be able to meet its target of RM220 million by the end of this year as many companies would be paying up to obtain service tax rebates. Meanwhile, Dakwah and Collection Department head Adibah Abdul Wahab said that the number of tithe beneficiaries was expected to increase from the current 18,000 families, next year, due to the economic downturn.

She said that the 18,000 families which had received aid had been recorded during last Ramadan, with the exception of those who came to LZS branches to request for aid. She said that urban poor families who had many dependants and earned less than RM2,000 a month were expected to form the majority of tithe beneficiaries, next year.

On another note, Selangor Development Corporation (PKNS) became the highest business tithe contributor, paying RM5.7 million, followed by SME Bank (RM486,000) and Syarikat Rahman Brothers Motors Sdn Bhd and businessman Datuk Zainuddin Abd Rahman (RM200,000 each). With the introduction of zakat@one pay, qualified individuals can swipe their ATM cards at machines placed at all Petronas stations in the state to pay their tithes without any extra charges.

18/12/2008 (Thursday)

Underground water supply by 2010

IPOH: The tapping of underground water in Batang Padang for the state Water Department, and possibly to supply Selangor, is expected to begin by 2010.

The first phase of the Sime Darby Bhd project is expected to be on line by then, and will supply 500 million litres a day (MLD). The state government hopes to supply 60 per cent of water from underground sources and the rest from surface sources such as from rivers and rainfall.

Currently, 98 per cent of water supply in the state came from surface sources, Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Mohammad Nizar Jamaluddin said yesterday after being briefed by a delegation led by Sime Darby president and chief executive officer Datuk Seri Ahmad Zubir Murshid.

The main sources of underground water supply will be Sungkai and Ulu Slim in Batang Padang. Selangor had earlier requested water from the Bernam Valley as the state faces a water shortage in 2012, and new projects will only be on line in 2018.

"The company conducted a thorough study on the project one year ago. There is great potential to tap underground water that is of good quality and environment friendly," said Nizar. He said Batang Padang has the capacity to provide 2,000 to 3,000 MLD of underground water.

19/12/2008 (Friday)

Blueprint to screen hillslope projects

KUALA LUMPUR: Once a slope mapping project being undertaken by the Works Department is completed, developers will find it much harder to build houses in hilly areas. Housing and Local Government Minister Datuk Seri Ong Ka Chuan said yesterday that his ministry would use a hazard assessment map being developed by the department as a blueprint to approve projects in hilly areas. The map will be ready in a month's time.

"The map is being constructed using satellite images and will allow us to determine dangerous areas which should not be developed," said Ong, speaking at his ministry's Quality Day held in Pusat Bandar Damansara here. He said there was a need to implement a law similar to Hong Kong's Hillside Ordinance for the long term management of slopes. He added that his ministry had taken steps to ensure the safety of housing areas built on slopes. "We gave instructions that there should be no more development on slopes of between 25 and 35 degrees. If the project has not started, then it will be shelved." However, the ministry would consider projects under way because it may affect the stability of the surrounding areas if the projects were abandoned. "If a retaining wall is already being built, then it should probably go on."

19/12/2008 (Friday)

627 vendor firms set up

Bernama

THE Vendor Development Programme has created 627 vendor companies which have secured contracts worth RM11.02 billion under the Ninth Malaysia Plan, Entrepreneur and Cooperatives Development Minister Datuk Noh Omar told the Dewan Negara yesterday.

He said the programme was started to encourage government-linked companies (GLCs) and multinational companies (MNCs) to set up vendor companies under them. "Until last month, 17 GLCs and 82 MNCs have participated in the programme," he said when replying to Senator Datuk Akhbar Ali.

Akhbar had asked on efforts made by the private sector and non-Bumiputeras to help create Bumiputera entrepreneurs and cooperatives. Noh said the ministry had targeted to create 150,000 new entrepreneurs in various fields by 2010 besides upgrading the capacities of 25,000 existing industries.

He said the target was important in line with government efforts to develop Bumiputera entrepreneurs and cooperatives and to create a Bumiputera commercial and industrial community and Bumiputera professionals in many fields. Under the 10th Malaysia Plan, the ministry aims to create 160,000 new entrepreneurs besides strengthening 27,500 existing enterprises, he said.

"Our target for the 11th Malaysia Plan is to produce 175,000 new entrepreneurs besides helping to boost the capacity of 30,000 present enterprises," he said. In efforts to create more middle-class Bumiputeras, he said, the ministry intends to develop 75,000 human resource professionals in diverse fields, including engineering, medicine, information technology and architecture during the Ninth Malaysia Plan period.

20/12/2008 (Saturday)

Don't mess with these hills

By : JENNIFER GOMEZ and EVANGELINE MAJAWAT



Residents want more control on hillside developments in Bukit Antarabangsa in the wake of a recent landslide there, in which five people died.

Residents living near hillside developments are keeping a close watch on the weather and activities on the hills. The recent landslide tragedy in Bukit Antarabangsa still fresh on their minds, they hope the local authorities will strictly monitor the developers. JENNIFER GOMEZ and EVANGELINE MAJAWAT visited residents whose homes are close to hillside projects in Taman Melawati, Bukit Antarabangsa and Cheras, all under the purview of the Ampang Jaya Municipal Council, to hear their views. Developers also give their response

BUKIT ANTARABANGSA

WHEN housewife Rofidah Mat Tahir bought a house in the area, the developer reassured buyers that no new project would be launched as it was a water catchment area. The developer, MBf Holdings Bhd, added that the area would remain green. That was 16 years ago and Rofidah paid RM127,000 for her double-storey terraced house on Jalan Mulia 2/4, less than 1km from the Bukit Antarabangsa landslide site. Now, every time it rains, she can't sleep. Worse, a landslip just outside her house has progressively worsened in the past year. Calls to Ampang Jaya Municipal Council to rectify the situation went unheeded, until last week, when the Public Works Department put a plastic sheet over it. "We don't know what is going on. Given what had happened here, my neighbours and I feel that the local authority should keep us informed."

One of her neighbours, Mary, said the PWD only came as a "favour" to a resident who called a "friend in the department". "All they did was to put a plastic sheet. This is not going to help the situation. They must find a solution." Mary added that the problem was caused by someone who had cut the slope. "It was to make an access road. "Monitoring must be beefed up, if not it's going to be a serious problem for the entire country." Azlin Ashaari bought a double-storey house in the area two years ago for RM300,000. And now, she has to live with the worry of

landslides, as moving out is not an option. "There is the loan to think of. We can't just move now," the 40-year-old banker said. She said there must be more control on hillside developments in the Bukit Antarabangsa area. "I know that developers are building because there is demand for hilltop homes, but it must be weighed carefully with safety aspects."

TAMAN MELAWATI

"THAT development is going to come tumbling down some day."

Retiree Lim Boon Pin did not mince words when asked about the Bukit Melawati project by Symbol Vintage Development Sdn Bhd. His house at Taman Melawati Phase 10 is adjacent to the project. "It should not have been approved in the first place," Lim said.

"During a downpour, the road leading to the project is flooded." Less than 2km away, two luxury projects -- 20trees by SDB Properties Sdn Bhd and Amberhill by Pembinaan Asmegah Sdn Bhd -- are causing worries to residents of Taman Melawati Phase 7.

Businessman Herbert Lai is not convinced about the safety of both projects. "I heard that one of the developers allocated RM5 million to drill the solid granite hill. "We cannot predict what will happen 20 years from now. All I can say is the hills behind Highland Towers were safe when the development was new but that changed over the years."

But Lai said as long as no new development was approved for the hillside, it was acceptable. "If any new project goes ahead, the local authority must ensure that the most stringent regulations are followed."

Zairani Zainuddin, whose parents live just a stone's throw away, shared Lai's sentiments. She said hillside developments should be allowed only if developers, engineers and the authorities followed strict guidelines.

"We could learn so much from Hong Kong. Their land is covered with hills, too, but it hasn't stopped them from developing it safely. "Even America has good guidelines for hillside development. We should learn from them. In those countries, the buildings not only have to withstand rain but also heavy snow and gales." She said homeowners should take ownership of and responsibility for the hills they live on. "If we have to pay a fee to ensure that the hills are continuously maintained and taken care of, then we should."

CHERAS

BUSINESSMAN Hasani Abdul Rahman, 42, looked dejected when asked about the hillside projects near his home in Jalan Bukit Permai 2. "We took our concerns eight years ago to the local authorities when Panorama Vista was coming up but our complaints fell on deaf ears," he said. The projects near his home are IJM Properties Sdn Bhd's Monte Bayu and Taman Bukit Permai by Perkuat Kuari Sdn Bhd.

Hasani, who has been living in the area for 11 years, wants to move out of the area, but the slowing economy is preventing him from doing so. "I would like to move and live in Shah Alam but now is not the time. I can only hope that the developers here play by the rules."

RESPONSE FROM MUTIARA GOODYEAR DEVELOPMENT

MUTIARA Goodyear Development Bhd managing director Edmond Yung said it had not neglected any safety aspects. The company is developing a project near Kemensah Heights through its subsidiary, Twin Ridge Sdn Bhd.

He said, however, the planned launch of its super-link and bungalow homes had been deferred until "the site looks better". Earthworks will, however, continue because if we stop now, it will be a disaster. We are following all the guidelines in place." He said the gradient of the slope in the site ranged between Class 2 and Class 4. The Selangor government has banned development on Class 3 and 4 slopes, which involves those with 25- and 35-degree angles.

RESPONSE FROM IJM PROPERTIES AND PERKUAT KUARI

IJM is developing three projects on hillsides within Ampang Jaya Municipal Council's jurisdiction -- Monte Bayu and Sh'ng Villa in Cheras, and Serenia Gardens in Ukay Heights. "We have a team of geotechnical experts advising us throughout the various stages of construction, so there is nothing to be afraid of," IJM Land Bhd managing director Datuk Soam Heng Choon said.

Upon completion of the project, its consultants would draw up a list of guidelines for Monte Bayu's management corporation. "We will pass on a list of dos and don'ts for residents in Monte Bayu, like what is being done in Hong Kong."

Developer Perkuat Kuari Sdn Bhd, which is developing the Taman Bukit Permai project in Cheras, also does not anticipate any problems with its decade-long project. A spokesperson for the developer said the project, spread over 40 hectares, has been ongoing for the last 10 years. "Our site (an elevated rock hill) is not classified as risky, and we have completed many properties here, including terraced houses." The developer will launch bungalows next year.

RESPONSE FROM SDB PROPERTIES

THE hillside where 20trees is being developed is no longer a slope. "The profile of the hill has been completely changed. We worked closely with our geotechnical and structural consultants to come up with a design to tier and terrace the site and build platforms wide enough to accommodate the houses," said Lina Othman, communications and corporate affairs manager of developer SDB Properties Sdn Bhd. "We have removed the soil so the units sit on a flat bedrock. At areas where the land is of different levels, the safety factor has been reinforced by retaining walls." She said purchasers have been informed about the design aspect and safety issues.

"The geotechnical engineer's margins are based on the most conservative recommendations set by the Hong Kong geoguide." About RM40 million has been spent on infrastructure and retaining walls. The developer would also be contributing a sum of money into a sinking fund for long-term maintenance.

Lina added that since 20trees was sited higher than its surrounding lots and is founded on rocks, it was unlikely to be affected by soil movements in neighbouring developments further down the hill. The Bukit Antarabangsa landslide site is about 6km from 20trees.

20/12/2008 (Saturday)

100 houses in Bukit Antarabangsa declared unsafe

By : V. Shankar Ganesh

SHAH ALAM: Some 100 families in Bukit Antarabangsa will not have homes to return to as their houses have been deemed unsafe for occupation, according to a Public Works Department report handed to Menteri Besar Tan Sri Abdul Khalid Ibrahim. A total of 252 houses were affected by the landslide and the PWD found that about 40 per cent of them were unsafe. This was according to a four-page summary of the report which was handed to Khalid at about 12.45pm yesterday by Gombak district officer Huzaini Samsi.

The Selangor menteri besar, however, declined to elaborate, saying he had to study it first. It is understood that the state will study the report so as to come up with plans for the affected residents before the findings could be released. All Khalid would say was that most of the residents would be able to return to their homes.

Khalid said he had directed Huzaini and Ampang Jaya Municipal Council president Abdul Hamid Hussain to study the report and visit the affected areas. "We will then discuss the report from them to see what help we can offer to residents who will move back in and those who will have to shift out. "There are also a few areas listed in the report where we will need to conduct some work for future safety."

Khalid said he would visit the landslide site at 10am tomorrow to announce the houses that need to be vacated and the help that the state government would offer. Some 3,000 Bukit Antarabangsa residents who evacuated their homes after the landslide have been waiting for the report as it would determine whether they would have to abandon their homes or they could return. The affected areas are Impian Selatan Condominium, houses in Jalan 6A of Taman Bukit Jaya, the whole of Taman Bukit Mewah and the entire length of Jalan 9 and 11 of Taman Wangsa Ukay.

21/12/2008 (Sunday)

IJN pioneer doctor opposes takeover bid

KUALA LUMPUR: One of the pioneers in the National Heart Institute's (IJN) establishment has come out against privatising it.

Cardiothoracic surgeon Tan Sri Dr Yahya Awang said when IJN was established in 1992, it was meant to be a premier body in academic and professional pursuits. "It was not meant to be a big commercial entity, and it should not be one," he told the New Sunday Times yesterday.

He said privatising the hospital could cost the government more in the long run. He said IJN should train doctors and set up cardiothoracic units in government hospitals. "IJN has done excellent work in treating patients and in terms of research. "They should now concentrate on training more doctors and nurses to provide quality treatment." From 1992 until 2002, Dr Yahya was head consultant cardiothoracic surgeon at IJN. He was also its medical director from 1998 to 2002. Dr Yahya also performed the first heart transplant in Malaysia in 1998.

22/12/2008 (Monday)

Port Klang FZ clarified

By : Sheridan Mahavera and Mazlinda Mahmood



The Port Klang Free Zone says it parted company with previous managers Jafza amicably

PORT KLANG: After nearly 20 months of silence, Port Klang Free Zone yesterday defended the "high" purchase price of land and the termination of the previous managers, Jebel Ali Free Zone (Jafza).

PKFZ executive chairman Lim Thean Shiang said at a press conference here that the price of RM25 per square foot paid to Kuala Dimensi Sdn Bhd for the project's 404.7 hectares was "justified".

Kuala Dimensi had reportedly bought the land for RM3 from a fisherman's cooperative. "The initial offer was RM28 per square foot but we brought it down to RM25. "We feel that it is a reasonable price as it includes infrastructure and given the holding period. "If you look at the land price in the surrounding area, it is about RM21 per square foot," Lim said.

Transport Minister Datuk Seri Ong Tee Keat, who was at the press conference, said whether the government paid too much for the land would only be known once PriceWaterhouseCooper's (PWC) cost analysis was done. PWC was appointed independent auditor for the PKFZ project, including the land purchase, whose pricing became an issue when it became public. On the termination of Jafza as project managers, Lim said it was due to "different expectations" between the Dubai company and Port Klang Authority.

Jafza, he said, was hired to help promote and market the PKFZ, and to capitalise on its expertise and contacts to bring in investors. "Sadly, the investors did not come in even after two years and we decided to take over promotion and marketing." He said Jafza was also not aware of the government's policies. "For example, they wanted to give a tax holiday of 50 years to investors but Malaysia's policy is only to give 10 years.

"They also wanted full autonomy to run PKFZ but this clashed with the government's intentions as we are subject to certain procedures, such as going through the Customs Department and other agencies. "Jafza thought that they could duplicate Jebel Ali (in Dubai) here at PKFZ but that cannot happen so we decided to terminate our contract with them."

He denied accusations that the project was hamstrung by political interference, excessive red tape and vested interests as alleged by Jafza. Lim insisted that they parted ways amicably. Ong said claims of tax evasion attempts, and abuse of power by politicians and officials overseeing the project would also only be answered after PWC submitted its report. He, however, defended the conduct of his predecessors, Tun Dr Ling Liong Sik and Datuk Seri Chan Kong Choy.

To counter accusations that PKFZ was a white elephant which tax payers had had to bail out, he released figures to show that it had been steadily getting investors since March. Ong said his ministry was confident that the project would re-coup its RM2.94 billion cost (for land and construction) and that PKFZ could service its RM4.632 billion loan. After a change of management in May and up to last month, he said, PKFZ had signed on 58 clients who had brought in RM974 million in investments.

22/12/2008 (Monday)

15 hill areas in Ampang deemed high risk



The affected areas

KUALA LUMPUR: Fifteen hillsides in Ampang have been classified as high risk by the Selangor government. Menteri Besar Tan Sri Khalid Ibrahim said the slopes were located near housing areas in Bukit Antarabangsa, Hulu Kelang, Lembah Jaya and Teratai state constituencies. He said the authorities would continuously monitor these areas. "However, we ask the Federal Government, through the Public Works Department, to carry out a more in-depth study of the areas.

"We believe the PWD is most suitable as their slope engineering division can conduct a more detailed study and formulate a more accurate solution," he said at a press conference after a briefing for Bukit Antarabangsa residents. Khalid said the state government was also keeping an eye on the Gombak, Hulu Langat, Hulu Selangor and Petaling districts, all of which face landslide risks.

22/12/2008 (Monday)

Government hospitals with private wings offer top service



Dr Kuljit Singh

KUALA LUMPUR: Government hospitals with private wings have succeeded in balancing the needs of the public and giving first-class service to those who can afford it, said the president of the Malaysian Society of Otorhinolaryngologists-Head & Neck Surgeons. Dr Kuljit Singh said the system was mutually beneficial to patients and doctors. Practised by two teaching hospitals -- University Malaya Medical Centre (UMMC) and Hospital Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia -- the system allows for specialists to see patients after working hours for a higher fee. This allows the doctors to earn more money and gives patients the chance to be treated by the best medical brains.

Dr Kuljit, who was with UMMC from 1998 till last year, said when the system first took off, it used to be only after working hours, in the evenings. But it has now been extended to the late afternoons, too. "It is sometimes easier to see a professor in the private wing because in the public wing you end up seeing a junior or an assistant. "This is because in the public wing, professors, senior doctors, junior doctors and assistants to professors work together. So, if you go to the public wing, there is no guarantee that you will be assigned to a professor." However, he said, there was no great disadvantage to those who went to the public wing as complicated cases were referred to professors anyway.

The slight disadvantage of the system is that it could lead to doctors being overstretched due to the longer hours they worked. Asked if allowing doctors to provide extra services on their own time would avoid the brain drain to the private sector, he said it did not really make a big difference. "Those who want the shorter hours, better perks and higher salaries of private practice will leave anyway, while those who have the passion for research and teaching will stay on." On the proposal by Sime Darby to take over the National Heart Institute (IJN), Dr Kuljit said it would not be a big deal if it was just a change in ownership. "But if it involves a change in the operating mechanism of the hospital and how it is run, then it is not good for the poor and the pensioners who depend on the IJN."

22/12/2008 (Monday)

Investments in zone up by RM226m

PORT KLANG: Investments in the Port Klang Free Trade Zone (PKFZ) went up by 30 per cent or RM226 million in the seven months since its new management took over in March. Investments had until March totalled RM748 million. The bulk of the investments are in the project's open land category, rising from RM720 million to RM916 million. There was a 27 per cent increase, from RM28 million up to March, to RM58 million during the same period, in investments in light industrial areas.

The number of clients leasing office blocks also increased from six in March to 10. Also showing a marked increase was the number of employees, including foreigners, from 972 to 1,659 people. Despite the overall increase in proposed investment, occupancy growth and number of employees, the percentage is still low compared with PKFZ's capacity.

Until last month, only 18 per cent of the open land facility was occupied, the light industrial unit facility only had a 17 per cent occupancy rate while the leased office blocks had an occupancy rate of 19 per cent. Questioned on this, Transport Minister Datuk Seri Ong Tee Keat said the figures should be viewed in comparison with similar zones such as the Jebel Ali Free Zone (Jafza). Jafza, Ong said, took six years to fill 40 per cent of its capacity and 10 years to reach full capacity.

24/12/2008 (Wednesday)

Bukit Tinggi tremors won't affect plans



Datuk Maznah Mazlan

DEVELOPMENT activities in the Bukit Tinggi area of Pahang will continue despite the frequent tremors reported in the area and its vicinity. Deputy Natural Resources and Environment Minister Senator Datuk Maznah Mazlan said the development included the 44.5km tunnel across the Titiwangsa Range to supply raw water from Pahang to Selangor. She said the tunnel design would take into account the environmental factors in the area.

"To cater for any eventuality, the methods used in earthquake-prone areas like Indonesia, the Philippines, Japan, China and Iran have been considered," Maznah said to Senator Datuk Roslan Awang Chik. Roslan had asked if the water transfer project could endanger Bukit Tinggi due to tremors. Maznah said the tremors in Bukit Tinggi were first detected on Nov 30 last year and the latest, on May 25. She said the tremors had not caused damage to any of the structures in Bukit Tinggi

24/12/2008 (Wednesday)

Feasibility study first for bridge to Sumatra

MALACCA: The government will conduct a feasibility study on the suggested 52km bridge linking Malacca to Dumai in Sumatra, Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak said. He said the study would determine the viability of the bridge, taking into consideration the cost, expected revenue and present economic situation. "It may become a reality in the near future. But for now, I think the ferry service is sufficient."

The Malacca government had earlier suggested the construction of the bridge which was estimated to cost US\$11 billion (RM38 billion). Chief Minister Datuk Seri Mohd Ali Rustam had said that the bridge would have great economic potential, considering the population in Sumatra had reached 70 million compared with Singapore with only four million. He said the idea of the bridge had been raised in 1995, but was put on hold a few years later due to the financial crisis then affecting both countries. "There are numerous factors to consider before we can embark on such a huge project. We will decide after a feasibility study is done."

Najib was speaking at the opening of the Ninth Malay and Islamic World (DMDI) Convention here yesterday. In his speech, he urged Malays in the region not to forget their roots and play their part in helping the community grow stronger and more united in facing challenges. "Despite the changes around us, we must never forget our roots and should take all relevant steps to foster greater unity, understanding and cooperation among each other." In urging the community to master as many languages as possible, Najib reminded them not to neglect the use of their mother tongue, Bahasa Malaysia. He also called on the Malays to reject all forms of extremism and the use of militant force to achieve political goals. Later, Najib launched the DMDI Finance House, which he said would begin with an initial investment of RM10 million and an authorised capital of RM1 billion.

Ali, who is also DMDI president, said he hoped that if the bridge project was approved, it would be financed by the private sector. "I hope the idea will become a reality because the Malacca-Dumai bridge can not only boost economic development, but also strengthen ties between both countries." He said the number of tourist arrivals from Indonesia had increased from 1.2 million in 2006 to 1.8 million last year. The number of Indonesian tourists who visited the Unesco World Heritage site here increased from 105,986 in 2006 to 128,057 last year, he added.