

1 January 2009 (Thursday)

PM Abdullah says government reforms will boost nation's resilience



Prime Minister Datuk Sri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi (fourth from left in the front row) and his wife, Datin Sri Jeanne Abdullah, joining thousands at Dataran Merdeka to usher in the New Year. On Abdullah's right is Am Bank Group chairman Tan Sri Azman Hashim.

PUTRAJAYA: The government will take steps to minimize the impact of the world economic crisis on the country and its people, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said.

It would continue to act with care and responsibility, he said in his New Year message last night. He said Malaysia was not immune to the global economic slowdown but it had several advantages which would help it overcome the situation. "Our financial sector is strong, unlike during the financial crisis a decade ago. "The country's financial reserves are at its highest in history, 37 per cent of the gross domestic product. "Our financial institutions have strong capital and are supervised prudently. Our national economy is diversified and does not rely on just one particular sector."

He said all efforts would be taken to boost economic activities by making wise use of resources and giving emphasis to internal resources, namely public and private sector investments. "The government has injected an additional RM7 billion stimulus so that the economy will not plunge into a recession but will instead continue to expand. "The RM7 billion allocation is focused on infrastructure development, human capital training and socio-economic progress of the people, particularly the poor and low-income earners."

Abdullah said the government would also focus on high-impact projects which could generate economic growth and enhance sustainability, such as the construction of more low-cost houses, maintenance and repair of public facilities and improvement of public transport. If necessary, the government will take additional measures to ensure that the economy continues to grow and domestic demand and consumption increase further. He said the country's ability to face the challenges did not depend solely on its economic capacity and measures.

The strength and integrity of the national institutions, a clean and efficient administration and a credible judiciary were also crucial in ensuring good economic and social management to draw investor confidence. "In this regard, I'm grateful that we have made great progress with the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission Bill and Judicial Appointments Commission Bill. "During this challenging time, we need to install the spirit of solidarity to ensure the future of our children. We have to continue to abide by the rule of law to bring about mature democratic practices."

Abdullah said a high degree of political responsibility should be adopted to ensure peace and stability and to safeguard the interests of the people. On the oil price, Abdullah expressed disappointment that the prices of goods were still high, despite seven petrol price cuts since August. "I once again call on producers, manufacturers, distributors and traders to be considerate, and collectively reduce the prices of goods."

1 January 2009 (Thursday)

DPM aims to spare 'rakyat' hardship in 2009



KUALA LUMPUR: Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak says he is not averse to putting in another fiscal stimulus package for the country if the economy turns bad next year. "My priority is that I really want to save the rakyat from having to go through hardships if the real economy is impacted," he said in an interview published in The Edge business weekly.

The government came out with a RM7 billion stimulus package on Nov 4 to ride out the storm following the global economic crisis that emanated from the West. Najib, who is finance minister, said if the government budget deficit rose more than five per cent, it was still tolerable as long it was for one or two years. When asked about the expected fall in government revenue as a result of lower crude oil and crude palm oil prices, Najib said the government was aware of that. "That's why we are very strict in terms of setting a ceiling. Government expenditure, for example, by various ministries ... if they request for additional expenditure, they will be told that they have to rearrange or reprioritise the projects, that they have to operate within the ceiling. We are mindful of trying to stick to the 4.8 per cent deficit."

As for lower crude oil prices, he said this was somewhat compensated by the reduction in fuel subsidy and as such the government expected its budget deficit to be at a manageable level. Asked on the challenges that he would have to face when he takes over the reins of government in March, Najib said in putting things into perspective, Malaysia was not facing a political crisis or a serious economic crisis.

"As far as Malaysia is concerned, what we are facing are the effects of a global meltdown which will impact on our economy adversely. "As a result, what we are having to cope with is an expected slowdown in growth, and the possible consequences of that include a possible downsizing and retrenchment of workers in the private sector. "But there is a saving grace -- inflation is expected to moderate next year. "In fact, the latest figures indicate that the worst is over and we should be able to achieve inflation in the region of about four per cent or even less (in 2009). Fuel prices have come down, which is a big relief for the people."

Najib said while Malaysia would expect a slowdown in economic growth, the country was not expected to slip into recession or even a technical recession. A technical recession occurs when the level of real national output declines over two successive quarters, causing a contraction in the total volume of production in the economy.

"This is not to say that we are in a state of denial; we are bracing for the worst in the sense that there are plans. And we have people who have gone through the 1997/1998 Asian financial crisis. "Our economy is more robust, more resilient. The banking system is on a stronger footing and banks are continuing to lend. "But we must be on guard; we have to monitor the situation closely." Asked on whether the political uncertainties after the last general election had been mitigated, Najib said they had, considerably. "First of all, Sept 16 went by and what was anticipated did not materialized at all. Secondly, there has been a smooth transition of power within Umno and Barisan Nasional."

Thirdly, he said the passing of the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission and Judicial Appointments Commission Bills reflected a "very, very functioning government, not a dysfunctional government". Najib said foreign investors were also beginning to see stability returning and they were now not questioning whether there would be a change in government. "I think we have passed that point," he said, adding that the people were now talking about the present government continuing and leading to the next general election.

2 January 2009 (Friday)

Immigration Department: A problem when everyone looks like a Malaysian

PUTRAJAYA: The Immigration Department blames the growing phenomenon of passport forgery on the popularity of Malaysia among immigrants.

"It is almost impossible to tell the immigrants from Malaysians as most of them are from Indonesia, China and India and look like locals," Immigration director-general Datuk Mahmood Adam said yesterday. To find an answer to this problem, his department is examining the process of issuing and renewing the Malaysian passport. Immigration officers were going through the procedures set under the International Organization for Standardisation (ISO) to determine if they were flawed. "A consultant hired recently could not find any fault with our system," he said.

Mahmood said the passport application and renewal process that took about two hours to complete did not contribute to the growing incidence of forgery. "The quick application of passports is not the problem," he said defending the department's online database. "We have a comprehensive and constantly updated online system that keeps track of those with criminal records, court orders, those under the suspects list and even those who have been declared bankrupt. "As soon as the blacklisted person has his or her fingerprint scanned, a complete profile of the person would be made available to us. "That said, it is entirely up to the government to decide if the process should take longer as practised in the United States, for instance. The application process there can take up to two weeks."

Mahmood also said a proposal to reduce the cost of a passport would be submitted to the government by the end of the month. "We currently have to undergo 35 security features that is very costly. We have so far concluded that five of these features are sufficient which would noticeably reduce the price." He declined to reveal how low the cost of a passport could be until further research on a new security feature is completed next week. A passport now costs RM300.

3 January 2009 (Saturday)

Negeri agencies to cut expenses

By : Patrick Sennyah



Datuk Seri Mohamad Hasan says savings will be used for projects beneficial to the people

SEREMBAN: All state government agencies must have key performance indicators (KPI) which will focus on efforts to reduce expenditure in view of the present global economic slowdown.

Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Mohamad Hasan said all departments and agencies have been directed to cut down on the use of electricity like minimize the use of air-conditioners. However, no target has been set on how much they should save.

"This is why we want all departments and agencies to have their own KPIs to help them reduce expenditure. "This way, they will be able to assess for themselves whether they are meeting their targets and if they are not, they should re-look their strategies and come up with new ones," he said after the swearing-in ceremony for the new state secretary, Datuk Mat Ali Hassan, yesterday.

Mat Ali, who was previously the state development director, replaces Datuk Norzam Mohd Nor, who has been transferred to the Public Service Department in Kuala Lumpur. Mohamad said the move to reduce expenditure was important as the use of water and electricity was among the main expenses for government agencies and departments. He said the savings could be used for projects beneficial to the people.

Mohamad called for proper maintenance of government vehicles to reduce expenses on repairs and replacement. "There is no need for high ranking officials to use a new car. I am using the same car for the past few years." All purchases which were not pressing should be put off, he added.

3 January 2009 (Saturday)

Lower rental may solve Klang Central issue



The RM12.4 million Klang Central terminal was built to alleviate traffic congestion in the town centre

KLANG: The Selangor government is trying to negotiate a lower rental for traders, and bus and taxi operators at the Klang Central terminal.

Health, Plantation Workers, Poverty and Caring Government Committee chairman Dr Xavier A. Jeyakumar said he had spoken to the developer's, Titijaya Group, representatives about the matter. He said Klang Municipal Council officials would also follow up on the matter. He said council officials had been told to renegotiate rentals with the developer so that lower rates

could apply until business and traffic volume at the terminal improved. "I have held discussions with the council president and the developer to lower the rental until things pick up," he said after visiting the terminal. High rentals at the RM12.4 million terminal were cited as a factor behind the reluctance of bus and taxi operators to relocate there. They will have to fork out up to RM10,000 a month to operate from the new terminal compared with the RM1,000 they are paying now. Traders will have to pay between RM2,000 and RM3,000 per lot, almost equal the charges at nearby shopping complexes.

Titijaya Group general manager B.K. Ong, who was present, declined to confirm if his company would reduce rentals but agreed to hold discussions with the council. "We will hold discussions with council officials and tenants at a dialogue session. At this point, we can't comment. We will decide after a study has been made."

Dr Xavier said the terminal was aimed at alleviating traffic congestion in the royal town with shortcomings addressed over time. "Klang is an old town and there was not enough space to build the terminal in the city centre. "The terminal was not conceived in eight months. Planning started in 2003. Why now when we have opened the terminal is there an issue over its location? This is not fair. The people of Klang have known for years about the terminal's relocation." Klang Consumer Association president A. Devadass said the association had been protesting against the relocation of the terminal since 2005. He claimed the council had turned a deaf ear to complaints on the matter. "Initially, the developer said only the express buses would be moving. Nothing was said about stage buses." Devadass said an alternative to the new terminal could have been the relocation of the the post office in Jalan Pos Baru to Orchard Square.

4 January 2009 (Sunday)

RM17b oil refinery proposed

MUAR: The Johor government is looking at a proposal by an international company to invest RM17 billion to construct an oil refinery at Teluk Ramunia in Kota Tinggi. Menteri Besar Datuk Abdul Ghani Othman said the state government was assessing the effects of the project on the lives of fishermen and tourist centres in the area before giving approval. He was informed of the investment proposal through a letter from the Malaysian Industrial Development Authority three days ago. "There is no problem in preparing a site for the purpose as we have about 1,200ha for the industrial sector at Teluk Ramunia," he said yesterday.

Ghani said an industrial impact study was needed because oil refining could affect fishermen and the tourism industry. He said that Johor was still being favoured by foreign investors despite the fact that the world was facing an economic downturn. According to Ghani, statistics showed that 28 per cent or almost one-third of the overall investment value in the country went to Johor.

4 January 2009 (Sunday)

'Let Bank Negara probe claims of bank fraud'

PEKAN: Bank Negara should investigate claims that money from local bank accounts were allegedly being siphoned off by fraudsters, Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak said yesterday.

The finance minister said he had yet to receive details on such cases but hoped the central bank could start the investigation as soon as possible. He also urged victims and those with information to lodge a police report. "(At this point of time) let's investigate and not speculate," said Najib. Deputy Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Senator T. Murugiah had on Friday stated that funds from 60 to 70 bank accounts were being siphoned off monthly, raising fears that insiders were working hand-in-glove with fraudsters. He had said that reports of "hijacked accounts" had been flooding the Public Complaints Bureau for more than two years.

There had been recent reports of people being duped into parting with their account numbers in response to text messages and emails telling them that they had won cash. Those targeted would be told to submit their account numbers so that their winnings could be banked in. On the economic slowdown, Najib said the government was optimistic that the nation could achieve its Vision 2020 on schedule. "Maybe we will not get six per cent growth for one or two years but we are confident of exceeding it once the world economy improves. " For Malaysia to become a developed country by 2020, it must record six per cent annual economic growth.

4 January 2009 (Sunday)

Post highway agreements online

KUALA LUMPUR: The government should post all agreements with highway concessionaires online to show that it is sincere in the exercise to declassify these documents.

The suggestion was made by MCA spokesman Lee Wei Kiat yesterday in a one-page statement. "In today's digital age, the public has become more educated and holds higher expectations of accountability and transparency from the authorities. "Post these documents online for the public to view and/or download. It is already a practice, where ministries and government bodies post their annual reports online."

Lee, who is also the party's Information and Communication Bureau chief, said MCA was disappointed that only 16 out of 22 highway concessionaire agreements were made public. It was reported that the contracts between the government and the nation's highway operators were made available to the press for a brief period last Friday prior to them being made public tomorrow following their declassification from the Official Secrets Act 1972.

A total of 16 highway concession agreements were made available to the press. The remaining six agreements were not shown. The agreements disclosed were for Guthrie Corridor, KL-Karak, Kemas, Metramac, Grand Saga, North Klang Sdn Bhd, Smart, LDP, Prolintas Aklen, New Pantai Expressway, Sprint, Besraya, Penang Bridge, Silk, Butterworth Outer Ring Highway and Shapadu. Lee reminded the Works Ministry that the government had promised to reveal all 22 highway contracts by Jan 1.

In this respect, MCA called on the authorities to declassify the remaining six highway concessionaire agreements. "The new year has already begun. We are let down that only 16 highway agreements were released to the public.

"We are further disappointed that documents pertaining to PLUS highway, the most frequently used highway, were not declassified." Those interested in viewing the contracts can do so at the Reading Room of the Works Ministry's library, in Jalan Sultan Salahudin here from Monday onwards.

5 January 2009 (Monday)

Sabah gets set to run Sipadan

By : Julia Chan



Pulau Sipadan has one of the best diving spots in the world.

KOTA KINABALU: Winds of change are blowing over Pulau Sipadan with the imminent handover of the island to the state government.

The National Security Council in the Prime Minister's Department is now in the final process of handing over the administration of the world-famous diving spot. "This has always been the plan. The island was handed over to the Federal Government in 2002 by the International Court of Justice in a territorial dispute with Indonesia. "Now that things are settled, the island will be returned to the Sabah government," said state Tourism, Environment and Culture Minister Datuk Masidi Manjun.

The state government will form a small panel headed by an assistant minister to tackle the various issues brought up by tourists and dive operators, and Sabah Parks will handle the day-to-day running of the island. "There will be less red tape and we will be able to manage it more efficiently," said Masidi.

One of the first issues to be tackled is the limit of 120 divers per day on the island. It was put into place several years ago to protect Sipadan's delicate ecosystem. But as the island's fame spread, more dive operators set up shop, and the complex distribution of the diving permits often leaves tourists, who have travelled thousands of kilometres to get there, disappointed. A proposal is being looked into to modify the limitation and allow 120 divers in the morning, and another 120 in the afternoon each day.

"This will allow more divers to experience the underwater splendours of Sipadan without overburdening the island." Environmental studies are being conducted to assess the island's sustainability, and whether increasing the number of divers will damage the ecosystem. What's important is that we leave the island as pristine as possible."

The island, off the east coast of Sabah, has hit the headlines several times, but not always for its reputation as a premier dive spot. In 2000, gun-toting Abu Sayyaf terrorists stormed the island and kidnapped 21 divers and resort workers, and held them hostage. All were eventually released. In 2004, all dive operators on Sipadan were told to move their structures from the island to conserve its ecosystem and corals. The move created much scepticism and controversy. In 2006, a barge carrying tonnes of building material beached on the island, damaging a significant portion of reef.

The materials were said to be for a million ringgit tourist facility with a rest house, toilets and scuba shop. The idea was scrapped due to widespread objections and a more modest project was proposed.

6 January 2009 (Tuesday)

'Hijacked Accounts': Bank employees 'not the crooks'

By : Azura Abas

KUALA LUMPUR: It was not an inside job.

Preliminary investigations by the Association of Banks in Malaysia (ABM) into illegal withdrawals from bank accounts had so far revealed that no bank employee was involved in selling classified information to third parties. ABM chairman Datuk Seri Abdul Hamidy Abdul Hafiz said legal action, including termination of employment would be taken against any bank employee, if it was proven that there was inside involvement in the illegal withdrawals.

"It is of utmost importance that the public take comfort in the fact that the integrity of the banking system has not been compromised in any manner. "Customers will be compensated if the security of the electronic banking system has been breached. "ABM is working closely with all stakeholders, including Bank Negara Malaysia (BNM) and the police to put a stop to SMS and 'phishing' scams



Customers will be compensated if the security of the electronic banking system has been breached.

Datuk Seri Abdul Hamidy Abdul Hafiz
Association of Banks in Malaysia chairman

targeting unsuspecting customers," he said in a statement yesterday. Banks have also periodically warned the public of some of the common tricks employed by fraudsters so that customers know what to look out for. Hamidy said lately most illegal withdrawals of funds were SMS-related. The investigations have shown that the SMS fraud generally involved victims who received unidentified SMSes stating they had won a cash prize and needed to call a stated mobile number to claim it.

The respondent on the mobile number will then prompt the victim to make an automated teller machine transaction in order to be eligible for the prize. This ATM transaction involves putting the ATM card into the machine and inputting the ATM number, after which the victim is told to open an Internet banking account using a pin number provided by the fraudster. The crook will then ask for the victim's 16-digit ATM number, under the pretext of helping the victim log into the Internet banking site for the first time, thus enabling the fraudster to gain access to the victim's bank account via the Internet. The victim will be asked to create a second authentication pin number which will also be requested by the fraudster for "verification" -- allowing the fraudster to keep checking the victim's bank account periodically from then on (with the help of the ATM card number) and empty it of funds. Hamidy urged the public to follow two simple guidelines to ensure that no fraudster gets access to one's bank account; never divulge bank account numbers and never reveal Internet security pin codes.

BNM said yesterday that it had received 165 complaints on unauthorised withdrawals last year. It also stressed the infrastructure for ATM and Internet banking transactions was secure, with security controls and fraud warning systems to detect suspicious transactions at all banking institutions. BNM is also working closely with the police and the public can lodge complaints by contacting BNMTELELINK at 1-300-88-5465 or email bnmtelelink@bnm.gov.my.

6 January 2009 (Tuesday)

'Hijacked Accounts': We'll wait for the probe, says Murugiah

PETALING JAYA: The Public Complaints Bureau is waiting for Bank Negara to conclude its investigation on the issue of "hijacked accounts" that has been on the rise lately.

Deputy Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Senator T. Murugiah, who alleged last week that funds from 60 to 70 bank accounts were being siphoned off monthly, said he did not want to speculate. "We leave it to Bank Negara to investigate and we will send a report to the Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak," he said after visiting SK(T) Vivekananda yesterday. "The problem began in 2006 and we don't know how much money has been lost or how it will be compensated."

He said he was not trying to dent the image of local banks but trying to save the people and their money. He said he was willing to help the police in their investigations. Murugiah added

that after highlighting the matter in the media, he had received a lot of emails from the public who had been duped. "In one case, a victim had tried to withdraw money from an automated teller machine but received only the receipt, not the cash. "When he updated his account, it revealed that the money had been withdrawn."

Murugiah said he was unhappy that most banks did not assist victims. He said a bank had assured him that it had found a solution to the problem and was confident of it implementing it soon. He added the bank had also told him that it had identified the banks in Indonesia where the monies were channelled to but were unable to trace the culprit.

In Kota Kinabalu, Bernama reported that the Consumers' Association of Sabah and Labuan (Cash) has called on Bank Negara or the Finance Ministry to present a white paper on the hijacked bank accounts. Its president, Datuk Patrick Sindu, said this issue had been around for a while and that Cash had received several complaints on similar problems. "There is no point of just talking about the scam. We need something concrete especially with the global economic crisis we are dealing with now."

6 January 2009 (Tuesday)

KTMB express for new Labu airport

By : Eileen Ng



(From left) Datuk Seri Tony Fernandes says the project will boost tourism and connectivity; and Abdul Radzak Abd Malek says the collaboration is a win-win partnership

KUALA LUMPUR: Talks are under way to start a new KTMB express service, linking KL Sentral to the new low-cost carrier terminal in Labu.

Modelled after London's Heathrow express, the new service will ferry passengers to the new KLIA East@Labu, to be built by 2011, to cater to AirAsia's massive expansion, The New Straits Times learnt that officials from AirAsia met KTM Bhd's top guns last week to discuss starting a new express service.

This service will be provided along KTMB's north-south passenger backbone, which will allow passengers from the Klang Valley and other parts of Peninsular Malaysia served by the KTMB

rail link, to fully utilise the new LCCT. KTMB has an existing station in Labu and a new spur line, costing between RM20 and RM30 million, will be built from the station to the new LCCT, located some 3km away. Both AirAsia chief executive officer Datuk Seri Tony Fernandes and

KTMB chief executive officer Abdul Radzak Abd Malek confirmed having discussions on the rail link project. "KLIA East@Labu will have strong infrastructure links because we believe that low-cost travel does not begin at the airport, but from the moment you step out from your house."

Fernandes said Labu was also chosen as the site to house the new LCC terminal because of its close proximity to KTMB's Labu train station. It is also large enough to accommodate the airport and future expansion, is close enough to KLIA for a wide range of synergies to be available to passengers and a shorter distance to downtown Kuala Lumpur than the existing LCCT. "The entire project will boost tourism and connectivity, especially between the neighbouring states of Malacca, Perak and Negri Sembilan."

On the pricing of the tickets, Fernandes said the amount had yet to be worked out, although he was hoping that it would around RM10, which is at par with the price of a bus ticket to the current LCCT. A one-way ticket on the ERL to KLIA costs RM35. Radzak said the collaboration was a win-win partnership for both companies.

"We can leverage on AirAsia's passengers to ferry them on our trains to other destinations nationwide, and at the same time, we can transport passengers from as far as Singapore to the new terminal," he said.

Last week, the cabinet approved the plan to build a new LCCT to service AirAsia and under a private financing initiative. KLIA East@Labu is about 7km from the KLIA main terminal building and will be built by the property arm of Sime Darby Berhad.

The multinational, which counts plantations, property, motors, industrial and utilities and energy as its core business, will act as a property developer in this project, while the region's largest budget carrier will be the client. Financing will be provided by AirAsia and its partners. The LCCT is earmarked as a catalyst project for Sime Darby's Vision Valley project.

Last week, Transport Minister Datuk Seri Ong Tee Keat said the new terminal was needed as the current temporary facility in Sepang would not be able to cope with the increased passenger volume. Under its final expansion phase, the Sepang LCCT will have a capacity of 15 million passengers a year, a figure industry sources say is likely to be exceeded by 2011. AirAsia and AirAsia X are expected to carry 19 million passengers in 2011 and nearly 30 million passengers in 2015.

6 January 2009 (Tuesday)

More questions than answers on tolls

By : David Yeow and Ili Liyana Mokhtar



The public inspecting the concessionaire agreements at the Works Ministry's library yesterday

KUALA LUMPUR: Three months after the cabinet agreed to declassify the toll concessionaire agreements, they were made public for the first time yesterday. And questions were immediately raised about the agreements.

MCA Youth's Legal Affairs and Parliamentary Legislature Research bureau chief Wong Nai Chee, who led a team of lawyers to study the agreements at the Works Ministry yesterday, said most striking was the lack of a standardised approach in dealing with concessionaires.

Wong cited the absence of a formula to calculate compensation to keep toll rates affordable. The former Kota Melaka member of parliament also asked why the concessionaires relied heavily on government loans. "These are private companies. When something is privatised, it should be self-financed, not built on government loans," Wong said.

"What's the point of privatising our highways then?" Wong said the Sistem Lingkaran-Lebuhraya Kajang (Silk) highway builder received a government loan of RM300 million, the first RM80 million being interest-free and the subsequent RM220 million carrying an interest rate of eight per cent per annum. "Other privatised routes like Grand Saga Highway, Lebuhraya Damansara Puchong (LDP), New Pantai Expressway and the Kesas Highway were also given government loans with different repayment schemes." Wong said there were many questions the government should address.

"We are still studying the agreements. After we have studied everything, we will submit all our findings and recommendations to the MCA cabinet ministers." He said as only a small number of people were allowed into the room to read the documents every two hours, it would be some time before the party could make any official comments. DAP members of parliament



These are private companies. When something is privatised, it should be self-financed, not built on government loans.

Wong Nai Chee
MCA Youth's Legal Affairs
and Parliamentary
Legislature Research
bureau chief

Tony Pua (Petaling Jaya Utara), Lim Lip Eng (Segambut) and Subang Jaya state assemblyman Hannah Yeoh were also at the ministry to study the toll agreements.

Works Minister Datuk Dr Mohd Zin Mohamed said he would try to allow more people to access the documents. Speaking after hosting a meeting with Egyptian Minister of International Trade and Industry Rachid Mohamed Rachid at the ministry yesterday, he said he would seek the attorney-general's advice on whether copies of the agreements could be released.

Malaysian Highway Authority director-general Datuk Mohamad Razali Othman said last week that copies could not be made because they needed the order of the Yang di-Pertuan Agong under Section 3 of the Fees Act (1951) to be tabled in the Dewan Rakyat and gazetted. On his meeting with Rachid, Zin said Egypt was opening up its infrastructure projects through public-private partnership initiatives in road, airport, port, water, sewerage, electricity and construction, and urged Malaysian companies to explore investment opportunities in the country. They also discussed investment opportunities in the construction industry, impact of the global financial crisis on both countries, and regional cooperation under the Organisation of the Islamic Conference.

7 January 2009 (Wednesday)

Sime passes up on IJN

By : Azlan Abu Bakar

KUALA LUMPUR: Sime Darby Bhd has dropped its plans to buy a 51 per cent stake in Institut Jantung Negara (IJN), bowing to public sentiment on the matter.

The company said the decision was made after feedback it received when the government deferred its decision to allow Sime Darby to begin negotiations with the Ministry of Finance. IJN is 99.99 per cent owned by the Federal Government. "We wish to announce that we will not pursue with our plan to acquire an equity stake in IJN. The company arrived at this decision after taking into consideration public sentiment and feedback received," it said in a statement to Bursa Malaysia yesterday.

Sime Darby will continue to look for opportunities to expand in the healthcare sector. Its plan to buy a controlling stake in the premier heart hospital sparked a major outcry. Many were concerned that the cost of cardiovascular treatment would go up if IJN was privatised. Since IJN's corporatisation in 1992, it has developed into a leading regional heart centre offering the best-trained hands and most advanced facilities in sophisticated organ transplants and coronary surgeries. It was financially self-sustaining within a year of operations and made a profit of RM20 million last year.

7 January 2009 (Wednesday)

Highland raped, RM500 fine

By : Jaspal Singh



Cameron Highlands 6.1.2009 -- Nst IPE9504. The action by the Cameron Highlands land office in issuing land-clearing permits to landowners has been called into question by reach. The group now wants the federal government to enact new law to safeguard the natural environment and quality of living in Cameron Highlands. Picture shows Land-clearing being carried out by a landowner who was given permission by the Cameron Highlands land office soon after even after despite the occurrence of the Bukit Antarabangsa tragedy. — Picture courtesy of REACHRegional Environmental Awareness of Cameron Highlands.

CAMERON HIGHLANDS: The permit issued to a landowner by the Cameron Highlands' land office last December stated that no heavy machinery was to be used to remove earth during land-clearing activities on his land in Kampung Raja here.

It also stipulated that the landowner must ensure that silt traps and proper drainage were installed to avoid earth from flowing into a nearby water source and onto the Kampung Raja-Tanah Rata road. But the permit did not contain order for the landowner not to touch slopes of more than 25 degrees gradient, in accordance with the 2002 Cabinet Guidelines on Highlands and Islands' Development.

The landowner broke almost every rule. He used a bulldozer and tractor to remove earth, did not construct silt traps or drains and attacked the steep slopes with gusto. And, what was the punishment he got for disregarding the law and the environment? His permit was revoked by the district land office and he was slapped with a fine of less than RM500. He can even make a fresh application for the same permit and continue the land-clearing activities.

Regional Environmental Awareness of Cameron Highlands (REACH) president R. Ramakrishnan is aghast. "This latest episode of blatant violation of laws and rules shows how important it is to re-visit the guidelines to make them more effective," he told the New Straits Times yesterday. "This incident should be enough to persuade the government to relook its own guidelines and introduce a new enforcement mechanism."

He said REACH had always believed that the guidelines were not adequate in ensuring compliance with environmental needs on the highlands. "What Cameron Highlands, and other hillsides like Bukit Antarabangsa, need are effective laws which ensure culprits are penalised severely for damaging the environment."

Ramakrishnan, who has been instrumental in highlighting the continuous "rape" of the highland since the inception of REACH in 2000, said the district office was to be blamed for giving permission to the landowner to clear hillsides. He also pointed out that this particular landowner was issued the permit just days after the latest Bukit Antarabangsa tragedy on Dec 6. "To make it worse, the land-clearing permit did not state that hills with steep gradients are not to be touched. What is wrong with the land office? Why did it allow this to take place?"

He alleged that the guidelines were being sidelined by the land office when issuing permits for land-clearing or earthwork. Ramakrishnan accused the Drainage and Irrigation Department and the Department of Environment of being "toothless" in stopping the land office from issuing such permits. "No one gives two hoots about the guidelines anymore. It is there on paper but it is not being enforced."

"The time has come for the government to once again intervene to stop further degradation of Cameron Highlands. Only this time, we need laws not more guidelines."

7 January 2009 (Wednesday)

Officer: No need to repeat guidelines in permit

CAMERON HIGHLANDS: The district office assumed that the landowner knew the guidelines involving land-clearing on hill slopes.

This was revealed by the Cameron Highlands district officer Datuk Mohd Noor Abdul Rani who said: "It is a general guideline which everyone here knows. There's no need to repeat the guidelines in the permit."

Stressing that the land office had always adhered to the 2002 cabinet guidelines, Noor, however, admitted that his officers were unable to keep tabs on all permit violations as it was a huge district. "It is also true that the most we can do in case of permit violations is to revoke the permit and impose a fine. "The fine is not more than RM500 as provided for by the National Land Code and the defaulter can apply again for the same permit."

Noor said all land-clearing and earthwork permits came with guidelines from the land office, Drainage and Irrigation Department and the Department of Environment. "Enforcement is carried out by all three agencies," he added.