

27 February 2009 (Friday)

Ready in 2005 but still vacant

By : Zarina Abdullah



Mohd Zawawi Ismail showing the vacant building

KUALA TERENGGANU: After more than three years, Mara Junior Science College students are still not allowed to occupy dormitories and classrooms in two buildings which were built in 2005.

The college, which has facilities to accommodate 500 students, had plans to increase the intake to 800. However, the delay in handing over the RM20 million premises to the college has meant that it has had to postpone its plans. The college is meant for high-achievers. More than 70 per cent of the students here are locals. Kuala Berang assemblyman Mohd Zawawi Ismail said he was disappointed that "internal matters" had led to many high performers not being given a chance to continue their studies at the college.

"I hope the matter will be resolved soon, otherwise the state will be the biggest loser. "I am speaking not just as an assemblyman but also as a parent whose child had once attended this college. "This institution is renowned for producing excellent students," he said yesterday.

Principal Zainal Yunus declined to comment. The New Straits Times has learnt that a certificate of fitness has yet to be issued for the buildings as some specifications have not been met.

27 February 2009 (Friday)

Increase in toll rates minimal, says Zin

By : Shuhada Elis

KUALA LUMPUR: Come Sunday, the toll charges at five major highways will be increased.

Works Minister Datuk Seri Mohd Zin Mohamed said this was necessary to honour the toll agreements with concession holders. "We hope road-users will not see this as a burden as the increase is minimal," said Zin.

The highways are Sprint, Ampang Kuala Lumpur Elevated Highway (Akleh), Sungai Besi (Besraya), the New Pantai Expressway (NPE) and several stretches run by PLUS Expressways Berhad. The increase for the PLUS highways, by 0.68 sen per kilometre, involves Federal Highway Route 2, linking Batu Tiga in Shah Alam and Sungai Rasau in Klang, New Klang Valley Expressway (NKVE), linking Jalan Duta and Bukit Raja, and the North-South Expressway.

Zin said users of the 34km NKVE will need to pay only RM4.90, a hike of 30 sen. For the Sprint highways, Kerinchi Link and Damansara Link, the increase is 50 sen and 30 sen respectively. Toll rates on Akleh will be increased by 50 sen, Besraya by 10 sen and NPE by 40 sen. Zin said some alternative routes were also ready for use and work to expand the roads was going on. He, however, admitted that they would not be able to solve traffic congestion in the city. "We hope the infrastructure can help disperse large traffic volumes but the argument here should be on improving our public transport. "Road-users in Klang Valley number close to 3.5 million for a population of five million. "The vehicles here are double the number compared with Tokyo which only has 1.3 million on the road for a population of 20 million," he said.

On whether the toll increase was politically motivated as the announcement came after the recent abolition of two other tolls, Zin simply said: "Don't blame politics. "If you want to politicise the issue then go ahead but I'm the minister in charge of this, so I have to make the announcement."

The Salak Jaya toll (south-bound) on Besraya was abolished on Tuesday while the toll at Petaling Jaya Selatan 2 (Kuala Lumpur-bound) on the NPE was abolished on Feb 13. He said the government had to pay RM245 million to concession holders in compensation due to the delay in hikes. The terms of the agreement stated that PLUS was allowed to increase toll rates once every three years but high inflation prompted the authorities to delay the increase since Jan 1 last year. PLUS last raised toll rates in 2005. Sprint and Akleh rates had not been increased since operations began in 2001. PLUS will get RM177 million, Sprint RM38 million and Akleh RM30 million.

1 Mac 2009 (Sunday)

Johor to be self-sufficient in rice with padi-farming venture



Datuk Abdul Ghani Othman (centre) handing out the keys to the four-wheel-drive vehicles to Mohd Sebalas Mohd, chairman of the Farmers Association of Kota Tinggi East.

JOHOR BARU: Johor is going big on padi cultivation. The state government has identified a 2,833-hectare site in Sembrong for the venture, which is aimed at increasing the state's food output.

Menteri Besar Datuk Abdul Ghani Othman said the plot of land in Kluang would help to meet demand for rice in the state and provide farmers with a viable source of additional income. "Johor is known for its agricultural produce, whether from small or large enterprises, including oil palm and rubber plantations. "The state government recently identified some land in Sembrong to cultivate padi, but we were unable to develop it without financial assistance from the Federal Government."

Among the infrastructure needed on the land is drainage and irrigation canals and machinery. Speaking after handing out keys for four-wheel-drive vehicles to 28 district farmers associations, Ghani said he hoped to obtain assistance from the Federal Government so that development on the land could begin next year. Although three to four tonnes of rice could be produced per hectare in general, the state government was looking for a better variety which could yield between seven and 10 tonnes.

"The Johor Farmers Association has a membership of about 60,000 smallholders. We expect them to take part in padi farming through the association. "We wish to encourage vegetable growers to take part in padi farming, too," Ghani said.

1 Mac 2009 (Sunday)

MB: Logging at Ulu Muda won't affect environment

ALOR STAR: Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Azizan Abdul Razak has given an assurance that the proposed logging project in the Ulu Muda forest reserve will not affect the environment.

He said the Pas-led state government was seeking the best logging method. The felling of trees would be handled carefully after getting views from experts. He also said trees within water catchment areas would not be felled. "Some areas in the Ulu Muda forest have been gazetted as water catchments.

"The state government has no intention of logging water catchments," he said after attending a state-level halal food industry dialogue here yesterday. Azizan was asked to comment on a nationwide signature campaign against the logging project in the Ulu Muda forest reserve.

The campaign, organised by a coalition of 19 non-governmental organisations led by Sahabat Alam Malaysia, aims to obtain a million signatures to exert pressure on Azizan to cancel the project. Azizan also took a swipe at the group and asked the coalition to get its facts right on the forest reserve before issuing any statements.

2 Mac 2009 (Monday)

New contractor for college

HULU TERENGGANU: The state Mara Department will appoint a new contractor to put the finishing touches to the two Mara Junior Science College buildings in Kuala Berang, here.

A source from the Mara Training and Educational Department in Kuala Lumpur said the two buildings were worth RM20 million and comprised dormitories and classrooms. He said modifications made to the buildings must comply with specifications drawn up by the Hulu Terengganu Municipal Council, state Fire and Rescue Department and other related authorities.

It was reported on Friday that the school, which is situated in Kuala Berang, had not been put to use more than three years after it was completed in 2005. The college can accommodate 500 students but has plans to increase the intake to 800 with the new buildings. The NST has learnt that a certificate of fitness has yet to be issued for the buildings as some specifications have not been met.

3 Mac 2009 (Tuesday)

Deadline for financial reports

KUANTAN: Government agencies at the federal and state level have been reminded to submit their financial reports to the National Audit Department (NAD) by the end of next month. Auditor-General Tan Sri Ambrin Buang said it was important that they do so, so that NAD would have sufficient time to audit. This was also to ensure that the auditing process was done without any glitches because the 2008 Auditor-General's Report would be presented to Parliament in August.

3 Mac 2009 (Tuesday)

Civil servants' role is critical, says Sidek

PUTRAJAYA: Improve and add value to the delivery system, civil servants were told yesterday.

Chief Secretary to the Government Tan Sri Sidek Hassan said the role of civil servants in efficiently executing government policies and plans could cushion the impact of the global economic crisis. He said as the civil service was duty-bound to serve the ruling party, they must ensure that orders and directives were implemented. "We must improve and value add ourselves so that we can be of good service," he said at the Prime Minister's Department's monthly gathering here, on behalf of Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak.

Sidek said the role of civil servants was one that could break or make a country. Their contributions, he said, were also part of the reason why Malaysia recorded a positive economic growth in the fourth quarter of last year. Although the growth was a mere 0.1 per cent, Malaysia fared better than many other countries, including its neighbours, which recorded negative growths. However, he cautioned against being lax as Malaysia's economy had yet to be hit by the worst.

Sidek said while the focus was now on the mini-budget that Najib would table on March 10, the RM14 billion budget tabled in November to stimulate the economy must not take a back seat. Development projects and initiatives, he added, must be implemented speedily and efficiently.

4 Mac 2009 (Wednesday)

Imports of some fish stop today

MUAR: Irked by a new ruling requiring seafood to be kept in insulated containers, importers will no longer bring in fish from Indonesia and Thailand.

They are unhappy that only containers purchased from the Fisheries Development Authority (LKIM) can be used, claiming the containers were being sold at a high price. Klang Marine Product Import/Export Association committee member Andy Cham Wing Kian, said a delegation representing 500 importers would meet with Agriculture and Agro-based Industry Minister Datuk Mustapa Mohamed to discuss the matter.

He said the delegates would brief him about the enforcement of the new ruling on insulated containers and the impact on the country if the import of fish was stopped. Cham said an average of 500 to 1,000 tonnes of fish from Indonesia and Thailand were imported daily, with an estimated value of between RM4 million and RM10 million. He said the import of fish at Lumut and Muar was stopped on Sunday, and at some areas in Port Klang on Monday. Bukit Kayu Hitam, other areas in Port Klang, Batu Pahat and Pasir Gudang followed suit yesterday. "We are not happy that LKIM has ignored our request that the making of insulated containers be extended to more companies as the competition will benefit consumers."

The new containers come in three sizes and are priced from RM105 to RM205 each, while the old containers only cost RM33 each. A fisherman, who only wanted to be identified as Tan, said the unfriendly ruling would hurt importers, consumers and the country's economy because the people had to pay more for local fish.

4 Mac 2009 (Wednesday)

Wildlife poachers, traders to face stiffer penalties

KUALA LUMPUR: Heavier penalties, including a maximum fine of RM500,000, will be slapped upon wildlife poachers and traders when amendments to the Wildlife Protection Act 1972 are approved in June.

The amendments include raising fines by between 10 and 30 times the current fines and imprisonment of up to 10 years. Natural Resources and Environment Ministry secretary-general Datuk Zool Azha Yusof said the amendments would be tabled in the next session of Parliament. This is good news for non-governmental organisations such as the Malaysian Nature Society, TRAFFIC Southeast Asia, Wildlife Conservation Society and WWF Malaysia, which have been calling for amendments for many years.

Zoal said: "The ministry is aware of the loopholes in the existing act so the amendments will not only focus on penalty but also on the coverage of protected species." He was speaking after the launch of the Judiciary Workshop on Wildlife Crime and Prosecution for Malaysia yesterday.

Zoal said those found guilty of wildlife trafficking would be penalised based on the number of animals seized. Imprisonment will be mandatory for offences involving totally protected animals. He said the ministry would strengthen wildlife enforcement activities at the country's borders and enhance information-sharing among Asean countries.

Last year, more than 8,800 clouded monitor lizards and 329 pangolins were seized before they could be smuggled out. Zoal said there were 45 cases of wildlife crimes last year, with nine cases still pending in court. Deputy chief of mission of the United States Embassy in Kuala Lumpur, Robert G. Rapson, said according to a 2008 US Congressional Report, global trade in wildlife was worth at least US\$5 billion (RM18.68 billion) and potentially in excess of US\$20 billion annually.

He said a partnership between the US and Asean nations in fighting the menace was important as much of the wildlife smuggled out of Asean nations ended up in the US. The two-day workshop, organised by the Asean Wildlife Enforcement Network and the Federal Courts of Malaysia, was aimed at reducing illegal wildlife trade in the region. It was co-sponsored by the US Agency for International Development.

4 Mac 2009 (Wednesday)

Bridge building project criticised



Datuk Bung Mokhtar Radin says the money for building the bridge should be distributed to the rural folks.

A BACKBENCHER yesterday criticised the government for planning to continue with the second bridge project in Penang in the face of the economic crisis.

Datuk Bung Mokhtar Radin (BN-Kinabatangan) said he could not understand why the money was not being used to help the poor. "Why do we have to proceed with this RM4.3 billion project in Penang when the money can be distributed to the rural folks who always support of the government?"

Datuk Mohamad Aziz (BN-Sri Gading) agreed, and quipped: "The people of Penang are an ungrateful bunch." Deputy Minister in the Prime Minister's department Datuk S.K. Devamany said the bridge project would benefit the people. "It will have a tremendous spin-off effect. Under this project, thousands of contractors and workers will be able to get jobs," he said in reply to Lim Guan Eng (DAP-Bagan). He said the project was held up when four mussel rearers refused to give up their land in Batu Kawan which was in the path of the construction. "However, despite this minor hitch we are still certain that the project will be completed by mid 2012."

Lim who is the Penang chief minister, denied any knowledge of the mussel rearers having contributed to the delay in the project. "We have no knowledge of this matter and hope the Federal Government can speed up the building this bridge."

5 Mac 2009 (Thursday)

Unpaid contractors seek panel's help to get dues

THE Public Accounts Committee has given itself a new task: to be a mediator for contractors who have yet to be paid by government-linked companies

PAC chairman Datuk Seri Azmi Khalid said there were many contractors who had not been paid for jobs done for GLCs, some for as long as three years. "We have agreed to be the mediator after taking into account the economic slowdown. "We have been swamped by phone calls, SMSes and also letters from small-time contractors who have asked us for help," he told a press conference at Parliament House yesterday.

Azmi however declined to disclose the number of contractors and the GLCs involved. "All I can say is that there are many contractors who are suffering due to the economic downturn and some have gone out of business." He said he received joint letters from 13 contractors yesterday, which urged PAC to help them collect payments from GLCs. He said those who had gone out of business had been unable to keep their business afloat when their debtors did not pay up.

Azmi said PAC decided to help them because they had been unable to get in touch with those companies that owed them money. "We have the ability to summon these companies to speak to us. At the very least, we can get these companies to tell the contractors why they were not paid." Azmi said PAC had sent letters to the GLCs asking for a meeting with them.

By : By Kristina George and R.S. Kamini



PUTRAJAYA: Tuesday's flash floods in the city could have been avoided if the Kuala Lumpur Flood Mitigation Project (package B) had been completed as planned in December.



He said two different flood diversion channels would begin from Sungai Gombak to Sungai Batu and from Sungai Keroh to Sungai Jinjang.

"The floodwaters channelled to these two retention ponds would be released once the water levels subsided to a safer point. "Once the project is completed, the areas badly hit yesterday such as Putra World Trade Centre and Jalan Ipoh, would no longer be part of a flood zone," he said.

The chaos caused on Tuesday also left many puzzled about the effectiveness of the Stormwater Management and Road Tunnel (Smart) in curbing flash floods in the city. Former DID director-general Datuk Keizrul Abdullah said the Smart tunnel was only one component in the Kuala Lumpur Flood Mitigation Project.

"The tunnel only functions to alleviate floodwaters from the Sungai Klang catchment areas and reduce the water levels at the Jalan Tun Perak bridge. "Yesterday, for instance, the system did not engage as the storm was concentrated in a different catchment area. "I admit that during my time in office, the tunnel was overly publicised and many remain ignorant of its actual functions."

In Kuala Lumpur, Federal Territories of Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya DID director Hashim Osman said the Sungai Gombak overflowed its banks at three spots because of heavy rainfall which made it difficult to channel rainwater to storage ponds nearby.

He said the situation was compounded by the fact that construction of the Jinjang detention pond caused water levels to rise quickly, among others, in Jalan Ipoh near the PWTC building, Perkim building and Jalan Tun Ismail fire station.

The high intensity rain near the Batu and Gombak catchments caused Sungai Gombak tributaries like Sungai Keroh and Sungai Batu to overflow their banks while Sungai Bunus, which joins Sungai Klang, caused flooding near Kampung Baru and Jalan Tun Razak.

"Water from Sungai Batu near Sentul was 2.4m above the danger level," he said, adding that Sungai Gombak rarely overflowed. Other areas badly hit included Bulatan Datuk Onn, Puduraya, Pantai Dalam, Bangsar, Segambut, Jalan Raja Laut, Jalan Kuching, Jalan Pekeliling, Jalan Duta and Jalan Kinabalu.

The floods also disrupted train operations. A DID report stated that several houses and buildings in Jalan Ipoh, including SMK Maxwell at Jalan Sentul, were damaged because of the floods.

A City Hall statement said it had several flood-mitigation projects in the pipeline, which included the construction of retention ponds, upgrading existing drainage and building more pump houses in low-lying areas.