

Apec nod for collective effort

By WONG SAI WAN

LIMA: Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (Apec) economies have agreed with Malaysia's call to coordinate their stimulus packages to head-off a global recession. Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak said various countries, including China and Malaysia, had announced their fiscal spending programme and others were expected to follow soon.



Presidential welcome: Najib being greeted by Peruvian President Alan Garcia upon arrival at the Apec meeting on Saturday. — AFP

China announced a massive US\$700bil (RM2.5tril) stimulus package to increase its domestic economy while Malaysia announced a similar fiscal policy worth RM7bil. "The leaders agreed that while public sector spending was the best way to stimulate their individual economies, they recognised that this will not be enough as there is a need to work closely with each other to ensure that the stimulus works," he said when meeting Malaysian journalists at the end of the first day of the Apec leaders summit here in Peru on Saturday. This is the first time the Apec leaders are holding a two-day retreat, with the first day dedicated to discussions on the global financial crisis. Najib said there was a need to ascertain exactly the amount of money needed for such an expansionary fiscal policy.



Leaders' ladies : US First Lady Laura Bush and Najib's wife Datin Seri Rosmah Mansor posing for pictures while visiting the 'Ruina de Pachacamac' archaeological site on Saturday. — AFP

He noted that the leaders agreed on such an action because there seemed to be a lack of confidence in the world financial system. "This has got to a stage where those with the capacity will not give out loans and this is why we need to coordinate our spending. The world economies must get their act together," he added.

Najib, who is Finance Minister, said the leaders also agreed to support the G20's recent declaration in Washington not to resort to protectionist policies to combat the financial crisis. He said they also called for the speedy and successful conclusion of the stalled World Trade Organisation's Doha Development Agenda talks by next month.

Najib also reminded the meeting of the need to change the global financial architecture, adding that Malaysia had called for such changes 10 years ago during the Asian Financial Crisis. He reiterated the need to relook the 64-year-old Bretton Woods agreement and the leaders acknowledged the need for a financial structure reform.

Najib also met with Colombian President Alvaro Uribe and Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong on the sidelines of the meeting.

Monday November 24, 2008

Road signs vandalised

By ANN TAN

GEORGE TOWN: Two bilingual road signs were defaced with red paint, barely 48 hours after they were put up on Friday. The Lebuah Acheh signs, both with Bahasa Malaysia and Arabic words, were located at the street's junctions with Lebuah Cannon and Lebuah Carnarvon.



Public mischief: The dual-language Lebuah Acheh road sign in Penang which was earlier (inset) defaced with red paint.

Local Government, Traffic Management and Environment Committee chairman Chow Kon Yeow said he received a call from the police at about 9.30am yesterday informing him about the incident. "I then asked the Penang Municipal Council to remove the paint immediately," said Chow who showed pressmen photographs of one of the defaced road signs taken by two council employees using their mobile phones.

Chief Minister Lim Guan Eng expressed his disappointment over the act, saying stern action would be taken against the perpetrators. "The state will not give in and will continue putting up the multilingual road signs no matter what happens.

"We will defend the usage of multilingual road signs unless there is a court order," said Lim who went to inspect both road signs yesterday. He urged the public to be more responsible and care for state government property. Asked if the state was going to lodge a police report over the matter, Lim said they would monitor the situation first and only do that if necessary.

Tuesday November 25, 2008

Deputy OCPD held for renting out idle Govt land

By NELSON BENJAMIN

JOHOR BARU: A Deputy OCPD has been arrested for purportedly renting out plots of idle land belonging to the Government for the past few years.

State Anti-Corruption Agency officers picked up the police officer at 8pm on Sunday. It is learnt that the officer, in his 40s, had rented out the idle land for amounts of several hundred ringgit to a few thousand ringgit depending on the size. Some of the land had been used to operate hawker stalls. Investigations showed that the officer had been collecting monthly rental for the past few years.

The land had been allocated to the police for future development projects such as police stations or police beat base. The police officer who has been released on bail, faces a jail term of up to 20 years and fined RM10,000.

Tuesday November 25, 2008

College to help produce skilful agro workforce

PUTRAJAYA: The Government has approved an allocation of RM450mil to build the main campus for Kolej Pertanian Malaysia in Tangga Batu, Kedah, aimed at producing a more skilled and knowledgeable workforce for the agriculture industry.

Agriculture and Agro-based Industry Minister Datuk Mustapa Mohamed said that once operational, the college, which now has about 300 students in seven branches nationwide, would be able to accommodate 2,500 students, the majority of whom would be based at the new campus. He said groundwork for the campus would start in the first quarter of next year.

He said the college would continue to offer certificate and diploma courses in areas such as food processing and distribution, rearing, aquaculture, farming and marketing, instead of degree programmes as such courses were already being offered by several universities.

Tuesday November 25, 2008

Parliament - Yong quizzed over toll deals and quality of roads

DEPUTY Works Minister Datuk Yong Khoo Seng was subjected to intense questioning by MPs over highway toll concession agreements and the quality of roads.

Winding up the Budget debate at committee stage, Yong refuted allegations that the Works Department staff were not capable of following standard procedures in carrying out road development projects.

On toll concessions, he said PLUS Expressway Bhd made a good move by giving a 10% toll reduction on selected highways between midnight and 7am. "Maybe it will not please all of us, but we must understand that concessionaires have to recoup and repay their loans and maintenance expenses," he added.

PLUS had announced that the discount would begin on Jan 1, and that those travelling during festive seasons would get a further 10% reduction on selected days if they used the expressways during the same times. To a call by Fong Po Kuan (DAP – Batu Gajah) that the discount time period was unsafe for lone women drivers, Yong said he would bring this up with the ministry. Several opposition MPs also stood up, saying that they were dissatisfied with Yong's replies on their queries on whether the toll rates would be reviewed.

Datuk Tajuddin Abdul Rahman (BN – Pasir Salak), known to enter into fiery verbal matches with Opposition MPs, urged Yong to ask the Government if it could ask highway concessionaires to further reduce the toll rates. "Maybe no one had realised that more motorists were using the highways now. The traffic rate has also increased tremendously to about six million vehicles at the tolled highways now. "This means that the concessionaires will have billions in extra profit," he added.

Yong said he would bring Tajuddin's idea for discussion with the ministry's officials.

Wednesday November 26, 2008

Water sellers in hot water

By WANI MUTHIAH

PORT KLANG: The licences of eight packaged drinking water companies have been cancelled for not meeting requirements while 16 others had their licences suspended for a month. The licences of 15 natural mineral water suppliers have also been suspended for one month.

Health Minister Datuk Liow Tiong Lai said the licences of the suspended companies would be cancelled at the end of the one-month period if they failed to clean up their act. Those who lose their licences can re-apply after meeting the regulations. He said under provisions of the Food Regulations 1985, packaged drinking water and natural mineral water companies were required to adhere to several conditions.

“They have to provide a microbiology analysis every three months, a chemical analysis every six months and radioactive analysis once every year,” he told reporters yesterday after inspecting the premises of packaged drinking water company, Evergreen Manufacturers Sdn Bhd, at the Pulau Indah Industrial Park. He said some of the natural mineral water companies were also suspended for obtaining water from sources which did not have geological approval.

Liow also said a special operation was launched nationwide on Sept 9 to crackdown on unlicensed packaged drinking water and natural mineral water companies and those who flouted the stipulated rules and regulations. To date, there were 12 unlicensed companies and four that did not exhibit their licence numbers on their labels, he said.

Liow said investigation papers were being prepared and would be handed over to the ministry’s deputy public prosecutor for prosecution. Of the 33 packaged drinking water companies and one natural mineral water company inspected, three were issued closure notices under the Food Act 1983 for unsatisfactory cleanliness level.

Fomca president Datuk N. Marimuthu said the ministry should release the names of the companies so consumers would not buy the products even if they are not been removed from shelves.

Wednesday November 26, 2008

More EPF members taking out money

PETALING JAYA: The number of people withdrawing their Employees Provident Fund (EPF) accounts in the third quarter of this year has increased by almost 50% compared to the corresponding period last year.

EPF CEO Datuk Azlan Zainol said 107,564 withdrawal applications were approved, a jump of 42.9% from the corresponding period last year. However, the amount disbursed was only RM808.53mil, compared to RM874.44 in the third quarter of last year.

Azlan attributed this to the Basic Savings initiative, which enabled younger members to be eligible for withdrawal. "Since members can only withdraw up to 20% of the excess amount in their Account 1 funds, younger members will naturally have less funds to withdraw for investment," he said in a statement.

EPF's Lump Sum Age 55 Withdrawal remained the most popular option for members who had reached the age of 55, with 29,054 applicants withdrawing a total of RM1,236.14mil. Under the Flexible Age 55 Withdrawals, which allows members to receive their EPF funds in instalments and on an ad hoc basis rather than as a lump sum, 7,154 members withdrew RM403.51mil.

The take-up rate for the Education Withdrawal remained strong, with 16,663 applications worth RM85.01mil approved, compared with RM87.14mil paid out to 15,877 applicants during the same period last year. The effects of the economic slowdown is reflected in the decrease of applications for housing withdrawal, with only 108,573 applications approved compared to 135,065. A total of RM1,577.24mil was disbursed, a drop of 19.5% from RM1,960.32mil from the corresponding quarter last year.

Wednesday November 26, 2008

Abdul Ghani quizzed over Iskandar project

By MEERA VIJAYAN

JOHOR BARU: Johor Mentri Besar Datuk Abdul Ghani Othman was bombarded with questions over the multi-billion-ringgit Iskandar Malaysia project. Among others, he was asked to explain what was special about the Iskandar corridor when the country had several other corridors including the Northern Corridor Economic Region (NCER) and the East Coast Economic Region (ECER).

Responding to Datuk Dr Hasni Mohammad (BN – Benut), Abdul Ghani said that Johor had the advantage of being strategically located, something Singapore had used to its advantage all these years.

Abdul Ghani pointed out that Johor was the leading exporter of various commodities and food products, but admitted that there was room for improvement within the service and tourism sectors. "I promise you that within three years we will have everything in Iskandar, including the largest retail space in the region," he said.

When Dr Boo Cheng Hau (DAP–Skudai) asked the status of the proposed Disneyland theme park within Iskandar, Abdul Ghani told the assembly that an announcement would be made mid next month in connection with a theme park.

Abdul Ghani also said that the greatest challenge Iskandar faced was in ensuring adequate manpower to fill up vacancies. "We are happy to take in Malaysians who get retrenched from Singapore if they have the necessary skills, as long as they don't go back to Singapore once the economy improves," he said.

Meanwhile, Gwee Tong Hiang (DAP–Bentayan) urged the state to save money by terminating the Mentri Besar's six special officers in view of the looming financial crisis.

Gwee said that it would save the state government RM237,600 in a year as it would not have to pay the officers their RM3,300 monthly allowance.

At that point, Speaker Datuk Ali Hassan interrupted to ask whether the Mentri Besar's officers in Pakatan Rakyat led states had special officers who were paid a monthly allowance. To that, Gwee quipped that Mentri Besars in those states did not have special officers who were paid allowances as they served for free.

Wednesday November 26, 2008

Malaysian timber set to get easy access into EU

By RUBEN SARIO

KOTA KINABALU: Malaysia is on track towards a trade deal that would see the country's timber products getting unrestricted access into the European Union (EU) market.

EU ambassador Vincent Piket said the Forest Law Enforcement Governance and Trade Voluntary Partnership Agreement (VPA) would essentially assure EU member countries that Malaysian timber products were sourced legally. He said Malaysia was set to become the first country in Asia to work such a trade deal that would give the country a comparative advantage.

"Plantation Industries and Commodities Minister Datuk Peter Chin realises the benefits of the VPA for the Malaysian timber sector," said Piket after meeting timber industry officials here yesterday. Malaysia's timber exports to the EU amount to some RM2.5bil annually and Sabah's share is about 20% to 25%.

Piket said negotiations were now focused on Malaysia's legality assessment on how its timber is produced. "The system is good but there are still improvements to be made," he said.

Citing an example, he said that when a forest plantation licence was granted, environmental issues needed to be addressed such as the need for an environmental impact assessment. "Transparency is the key word in such matters," Piket said.

Thursday November 27, 2008

Syed Hamid: Close to 2.4 million faulty MyKads replaced

 [Ten percent of MyKad faulty](#)

KUALA LUMPUR: About 10% of the 24 million MyKads issued since 2001 were found to be faulty and had been replaced.

Home Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar said most of the cases were recorded this year, with 888,495 replacement MyKads issued until October. He said the main complaints were defective chips or damaged plastic cards. Last year, the number of cards was 769,674, and in 2006 it was 204,572. The number of MyKad replacements in 2001 was 32,670, followed by 24,131 (2002), 16,678 (2003), 22,484 (2004), and 45,487 (2005).

Syed Hamid said he was not happy with the number of faulty cards and said the low number of damaged or defective MyKads in the first year compared to this year was because the chip-based card was only rolled out on a pilot project basis in 2001. When pointed out that the figure had jumped by almost 20 times since 2005, he said: "The only explanation I can give you is because of the rollout. Coverage is more extensive. But I think this needs to be improved." He said the National Registration Department was continuously looking at ways to upgrade the MyKad, from the security features to even the plastic compound used to make them.

Syed Hamid also announced that the green card was reintroduced on Nov 15 so that stateless persons had a form of identification. He said the Government stopped issuing the green card in 2004, which needed to be renewed every two years. There were about 30,000 holders then. The new green card system requires the holder to renew it every five years.

Syed Hamid was speaking to reporters after launching the MyDaftar programme at the International Youth Centre in Cheras. Under the programme, NRD staff would go on scheduled roadshows to districts and rural areas to help register birth and death certificates and MyKads. "Registering the birth of your child is actually the responsibility of parents. But to help them, we are going to go and meet the people," Syed Hamid said.

Thursday November 27, 2008

Contractors get okay to raise costs

MALACCA: A total of 1,311 contractors involved in government projects have been allowed to vary their project costs following the recent increase in the cost of building materials.

Works Minister Datuk Mohd Zin Mohamed said his ministry had so far paid out RM44.2mil as part of the permitted variation of price for 270 projects with calculations being made for the remaining 1,041 projects. He also said that the ministry had included another 15 construction materials to the current five in the variation of price.

“We have also allowed variation of price for mechanical and electrical work if the work scope includes civil engineering and building construction,” he told reporters after attending a briefing here for contractors during a working visit yesterday. Besides Johor, he noted the ministry had also approved variation of prices for its projects in Malacca and had since paid out RM7mil to the contractors.

Mohd Zin added that a total of 406 projects totalling RM9.4bil would adopt the Industrial Building System with 189 of the projects being tendered out, adding that a total of 121 projects under the system would be tendered out between 2009 and 2010.

He noted the Government would continue adopting the system in a move to reduce dependence on foreign labour while improving the efficiency of the nation’s construction industry. “Our dependence on foreign labour is extremely high at present with some 2.2 million being employed while only 315,000 of them are registered,” he said, adding that the workers remitted an estimated RM18bil a year to their respective countries. With the system’s blueprint in place, he said Malaysia hoped to reduce foreign labour in the construction industry to 250,000 by 2015.

Thursday November 27, 2008

Tourism hit as Kelantan’s beaches are washed away

KOTA BARU: Most of Kelantan’s beaches are badly eroded and this is affecting the state’s tourism plans. Department of Drainage and Irrigation (DID) director-general Datuk Ahmad Husaini Sulaiman said that erosion is eating away at some 30km of beachfront stretching from Sabak in Pengkalan Chepa up through the Thai-Malaysia border areas. DID has placed those areas under category one, with erosion occurring rapidly over the past five years.



Disappearing act:. Fisherman Nawi Mahmud, 75, walks along Pantai Kuala Pak Amat which is being eroded by strong waves from the South China Sea.

“To date, DID has not received any significant plans on how to arrest the natural phenomenon but we would undertake a study and recommend to the rightful authorities how best to tackle the problem,” Ahmad Husaini said after inspecting the erosion at Pantai Kuala Pak Amat in the Pantai Cahaya Bulan (PCB) coastal area.

Erosion of local beaches is cited as a natural phenomenon due to the increasingly strong waves from the South China Sea. It is disheartening to the state since Kuala Pak Amat, for instance, has sound tourist potential having been the historic landing site of Japanese troops in World War II.

This was the Japanese point of invasion into Malaya just hours before its carriers bombed the US Pacific fleet in Pearl Harbour, Hawaii. For now, Ahmad Husaini said the DID planned to seek federal allocation to rehabilitate the Kuala Pak Amat beachfront next year. It would also closely monitor the remaining stretches of beach to prevent the erosion from reaching coastal villages. To date, the DID has installed two wave breakers at Sabak and in Pantai Irama, Bachok. However, more are needed in the long-term to overcome the erosion, Ahmad Husaini said.

Thursday November 27, 2008

Parliament - No sign of new schools

By LEE YUK PENG, LOH FOON FONG and LISA GOH

THE delay in the construction of Chinese and Tamil schools has been because of problems in land acquisition. Deputy Education Minister Datuk Dr Wee Ka Siong added that there were also the location to work out and the need to plan for the intake of schoolchildren.

He said this in his reply to a motion by Teo Nie Ching (DAP-Serdang) to cut RM10 from the Education Minister’s salary. The motion was rejected by the House after a lengthy debate. In her motion, Teo said Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Tun Hussein had failed to deliver on his promise in January that the ministry would build six new Chinese schools in Wangsa Maju, Bukit Serdang, Rawang and Danga Bay. Dr Wee gave his assurance that

the construction of the schools would go ahead because the Government had allocated development funds of RM1.4bil for Chinese schools and RM552.9mil for Tamil schools. "The ministry cannot just say okay, agree to build the schools and then forget about them afterwards."

"For example, although the last Serdang MP lost in the March general election, he met various groups recently to plan out the right location for a proposed Chinese school. "Even the former Rawang MP has helped out by seeking cooperation from a developer to give land for a proposed Chinese school there. "We are also in the process of acquiring suitable land from six locations for a Chinese school in Sg Long. The present and former MCA presidents have also been to the ground to ensure that the six schools will be built."

Dr Wee said a special unit under the Cabinet committee of Chinese and Tamil schools, headed by the Deputy Prime Minister, would monitor the development of such schools.

"In October, the Minister had called for a three-day meeting with 157 leaders and administrators from Chinese and Tamil schools and religious and mission schools to thrash out the problems they faced. "The meeting resulted in the issuance of a working paper for the ministry to implement the construction of such schools in the country and the number of teachers needed," he added.

Friday November 28, 2008

Pak Lah: Civil servants can go back to pension scheme

By SIM LEOI LEOI

Civil servants who opted for EPF can revert to pension

PUTRAJAYA: Some 40,000 civil servants, who had opted for the Employees Provident Fund, can now revert to the pension scheme.



Well done: Abdullah talking to UiTM Vice-Chancellor Datuk Seri Ibrahim Abu Shah after the award presentation in Putrajaya Thursday. Looking on is Chief Secretary to the Government Tan Sri Mohd Sidek Hassan.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said these civil servants can exercise their option to revert to the pension scheme in January. "Their decision will take effect from Feb 1, and they will be able to enjoy all the facilities currently entitled to pensioners, such as free medical treatment. Parents of civil servants, who have passed away and were single at that time, will also receive ex-gratia payments.

"These are some of the decisions that were made following a recent meeting by the Cabinet committee on appointments and salaries for civil servants," he said in his speech before presenting the Public Sector Quality Awards at the Putrajaya International Convention Centre here yesterday.

Other decisions taken by the committee included upgrading the salary schemes for investigating officers under the Anti-Corruption Agency and for senior, low-ranking officers and constables in the police force, and a 20% increase in pay for maritime officers.

"All these decisions will be effective from Jan 1," he said, adding that the Government would work out the actual amount of financial allocation involved in the upgrading and salary increase later. Cuepacs welcomed the move to allow civil servants on the EPF scheme to opt for the pension scheme, said its secretary-general Ahmad Shah Mohamad Zain.

Last week, Cuepacs president Omar Osman complained that civil servants who opted for EPF scheme did not enjoy benefits such as free medical treatment in government hospitals and gratuity payments upon their retirement.

Earlier, Abdullah said he was glad to note from his dialogues with various business and non-governmental groups that the number of complaints involving public delivery of services had gone down. "In the World Competitiveness Yearbook report for this year, Malaysia has managed to improve its ranking from 23rd last year to 19th this year. For the category of countries with more than 20 million population, we have also moved one place from 8th to 7th this year. "Efforts to enhance our online access for government services have begun to bear fruit. In an analysis by Brown University, Malaysia's online government services have improved from 25th place last year to 11th place," he said.

However, Abdullah said award-winning government departments should ensure that they continue to maintain and improve on their standards. "Selection of winners must be made according to high standards so that their win will not be disputed by anybody, which can then erode public confidence in our awards," he said.

Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM) won the Prime Minister's Award for Quality at the event. The five winners for the Public Service Innovation Award were the Dental Specialist Clinic in Kuching, Perak Irrigation and Drainage Department, Department of Survey and Mapping, Seremban Municipal Council and Mampu.