

Sorting out transportation quandary

Good transport system is key criterion to attract foreign investors

by ANIS HAZIM

FORMER Transport Minister Datuk Seri Dr Wee Ka Siong's short service in the portfolio couldn't have ended in a worse possible way last month. While serving as caretaker minister before the 15th General Election's (GE15) polling day, the light rail transit (LRT) system, the backbone of the intra-city rail services, had its first major incident on Nov 7, disrupting the LRT Kelana Jaya line that plies through 16 critical stations for one whole week.

The once-in-23-year incident wreaked havoc on the whole central region traffic flow as the western confluence of the Klang Valley struggles to cope with additional road transportation needs to cater to the 200,000 affected daily commuters.

Universiti Putra Malaysia's Road Safety Research Centre head Assoc Prof Dr Law Teik Hua appeared to be sympathetic to Wee, reasoning that Malaysia's public transport problems are impossible to solve in a short time span.

"It is no doubt that Wee is a very good 'firefighter'...He faced many problems and he had to solve the problem immediately," Law told *The Malaysian Reserve* (TMR).

However, Law said the issue with the country's public transport must be addressed from the root.

"We have to see the root and we need to make sure the system can be fixed and improved to accept the new challenges," he said.

Good Transport System Attracts Foreign Investors

Law noted that a good transport system is always a key criterion to attracting foreign investors to the country.

"We still cannot persuade people to use or rely fully on public transport. People still buy cars that are more convenient as they are not confident in our public transport.

"That is why, to make sure that we are going to attract or convince more people to use our public transport, there is a big room for the improvement," he said.

Explaining further on what is defined by a good public transport system, Law said a good system generally must meet a number of criteria, namely efficient, competent and safe.

"We have to make sure our public transport system is reliable and economical, then only we can attract more people to use public transport," he said.

Law said building more highways won't eliminate road congestion. In fact, it will attract more vehicles to the road.

"After having so many highways, do you see the traffic congestion problem is solved? The answer is no and it is actually getting worse.

"Building more highways will attract more people to use private vehicles because they will have more confidence in their vehicles compared to public transport."

He stressed that Malaysia is lagging behind neighbouring countries when it comes to national public transport.

"We need to build more high-quality public transport, not just in the Klang Valley, but also in other states, including Sabah and Sarawak."

Restart HSR Project

Moreover, he hopes to see the revival of the aborted Kuala Lumpur (KL)-Singapore high-speed rail (HSR) project.

"We need better transport and one of it is the HSR project, which I believe is a good project, but there



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are so many political issues (related to the project).

"I hope the new government can solve all the political issues because this is a (key) interest in public transport, and we need this kind of transport to help our transportation grow further," he said.

In August, former Prime Minister (PM) Datuk Seri Ismail Sabri Yaakob said Malaysia was in discussions on a new proposal with Singapore to revive the HSR project. Additionally, he said Malaysia had plans to establish HSR between KL and Bangkok.

Previously, Malaysia and Singapore signed a legally binding bilateral agreement on the HSR project in December 2016 under the former PM Datuk Seri Mohd Najib Razak's administration.

The 350km HSR was slated to have seven stations and would have cut travel time between KL and Singapore to 90 minutes. However, the project was suspended at Malaysia's request after a change in the



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Malaysian government following GE14 in 2018.

Consequently, Malaysia had to pay about US\$102 million (RM445.74 million) in compensation to Singapore due to the project termination.

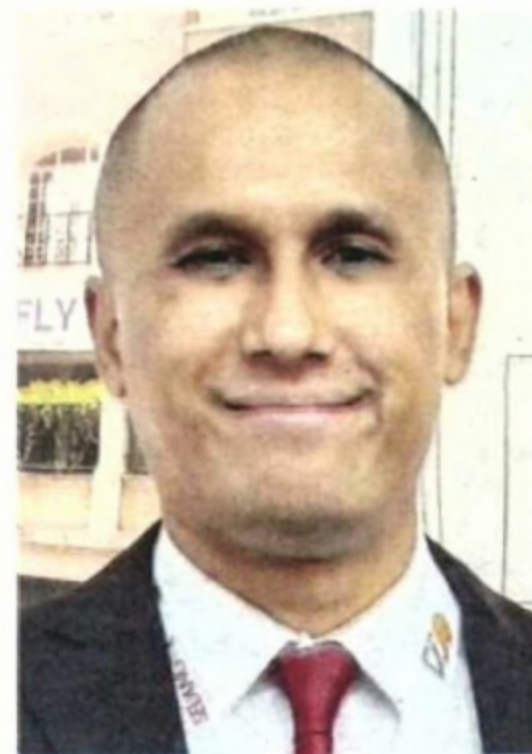
"It is about the time for Malaysia to think for the future — other alternatives and choices for travel with public transport," he added.

Looking at the short-term solution, he said the new minister should tackle the long interval waiting time for the LRT and MRT (mass rapid transit).

Contribution on International Scale

University College MAIWP International's Azlan Abu Bakar opined that although the previous government cannot be measured thoroughly in terms of implementation or success, Malaysia has made progress at the international level.

"Malaysia has been entrusted by two major world transport organ-



Mohd Harridon says the aerospace sector is expected to play a prominent role in economic growth next year

isations, firstly the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO) where Malaysia retained its ICAO council seat for the term 2022 to 2025.

"Malaysia has also been elected to occupy one of the 20 seats as a council member of the International Maritime Organisation for the term 2022 to 2023," Azlan tells TMR.

On the cabotage policy, he said it should be resolved as soon as possible with all relevant stakeholders, so that it can benefit the local companies, industry and the country.

To recap, in November 2020, the government announced the revocation of the cabotage policy exemption, which many view as a step backwards because this may deter foreign investors from choosing Malaysia for their digital infrastructure investments.

On logistics, Azlan said Malaysia needs to focus on trade facilitation by enhancing its logistics capabili-

ties and performance.

"The rise in logistics costs, bureaucracy, the study of the percentage rate of all major ports, delays in cargo clearance and the lack of professionals in transport and logistics should be addressed.

"Environmental sustainability — by applying sustainability aspects in the supply chain and logistics — is also important to make the industry competitive through smart solutions and technology," he added.

Moreover, he views that the national freight and logistics data should be established to ensure every policy introduced can be implemented with reference to all available data that need to be improved.

He said the government should continue to support Malaysia's ability to implement technology 4.0 in logistics management, especially the Single Window system.

What's Next for Aviation Sector?

In terms of the aviation industry, Malaysia has recently made some notable improvement in the area of safety rating, according to Universiti Kuala Lumpur Malaysian Institute of Aviation Technology Assoc Prof Dr Mohd Harridon Mohamed Suffian.

"Malaysia had successfully regained the paramount Category 1 Air Safety Rating of the US after the issues that were duly stipulated or raised were appropriately mitigated and solved," Mohd Harridon told TMR.

He said this should be commendable as it was an arduous and intricate process, and each faction of the transport ministry had integrated together effectively as a team to achieve the feat.

"With the restoration of Category 1, Malaysia had complied with the intense safety standards set by ICAO and this would subsequently alleviate the plausible number of flight routes to the US and, in tandem, the economic growth pursuant to aviation is imminent," he said.

In the first quarter of 2022, he noted that 21 Air Traffic Right applications were approved — 13 were for international routes and eight for domestic routes.

"This cumulatively delineated that the growth of the aviation sector in Malaysia is competitive, healthy and positive," he said.

According to him, the previous government had shown a commiseration with the social-economic burden posed by increased airfares during festive seasons and numerous initiatives, such as the increase of flight frequency and redeployment of airplanes.

"At a certain point or time range in 2022, the prices of the flight tickets had indicated a 30% reduction and the proactive measures taken by relevant parties were benevolent to the masses," he noted.

Therefore, Mohd Harridon foresees that the new Transport Minister, Anthony Lake, would have a plate full of additional policies and directives that need to be created to navigate through the said conundrum.

According to him, the aerospace sector is expected to play a prominent role in economic growth next year, based on the 2023 Economic Outlook by the Finance Ministry.

"Hence, the new transport minister would need to be formidable and stoic in propelling the aviation industry to gain the expected economic growth, with concentration upon policies related to supply chain, maintenance repair and overhaul of aircraft, manufacturing and assembly hub for aircraft, tax breaks or reliefs for aviation start-ups and tax allowances for domestic and international investors as well as for the others," he added.