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SARAWAK TO LEAD IN SUSTAINABLE RIVER TRANSPORTATION

Kuching, Mar 26 – The state government plans to lead the development of a comprehensive inland waterway transport (IWT) system covering both passenger and commercial use, which will be the first of its kind to be developed in Malaysia. According to Dr. Richard Leete, UNDP Resident Representative for Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei, an IWT system will optimize the use of the state’s rivers as a cost efficient and green mode of transportation, especially for rural areas, while helping to reduce carbon emissions and improving public service delivery to rural areas.

“Given the state’s rugged terrain, sparse population and the high cost associated in building roads to connect the different geographical areas, there is a strong case for capitalizing on the abundance of natural waterways in Sarawak,” Dr. Leete said at a stakeholders meeting in the state capital today which was held to review progress on the Sarawak Inland Waterway Transport System (SIWT) Study.

“Improving river transportation would be especially beneficial for rural communities as it would increase access to markets and employment opportunities. In the long term, it can be expected to reduce poverty and inequality in the state.”

According to Dr. Leete, rural households account for more than 98% of Sarawak’s hardcore poverty and the incidence of poverty is highest among the indigenous communities.

“A comprehensive IWT that is well managed and integrated with other modes of transport such as roads and airports has the potential to complement other development plans such as SCORE, providing the vital link for people to commute to jobs. It can also help to bring development services to the doorstep of rural communities.”

He added that the areas earmarked under the Sarawak Corridor of Renewable Energy (SCORE) coincide with many of the major river transport routes and there was an urgent need for holistic management of the inland waterways to monitor the impact of development activities on the ecology and health of the rivers.

The SIWT Study by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Sarawak River's Board (SRB) seeks to support the government's strategy as outlined in the 9th Malaysia Plan to develop the rivers of Sarawak as an integral part of the state's transportation network.

The aim of the project is to formulate a Masterplan that will enhance the development of Sarawak's waterways as a viable and sustainable infrastructure network, increasing mobility and access to the rural areas, enhancing opportunities for tourism and providing for profitable, long-term economic activities.

The Master Plan will cover the period to 2020 and will also incorporate a five-year Action Plan that will be implemented by the SRB.

According to Dr Stephen Rundi, Chairman of SRB, the project is currently in its second year, with the commencement of the technical study which covers the multiple functions of IWT including community water transport, cargo and freight transport, riverine tourism, and safety enhancement. The technical study is expected to be completed by the third quarter of 2008.

"Sarawak's intact riverine landscape puts it at a clear advantage to offer sustainable river transportation as a viable solution to meet the demands of the growing economy, and SRB will support an expanded role for the management of our rivers" he said.

"In addition, SRB has submitted four pilot projects to the Economic Planning Unit for funding to implement and test some of the ideas for improving community transport networks and facilities, preservation of river resources and improvement of navigation and safety along the waterways."

At the same event, a report titled, "Inland Waterway Transport System in Sarawak" was launched by the Deputy Chief Minister, YB Datuk Patinggi Tan Sri (Dr) Alfred Jabu which summarises some of the key issues and initiatives of the SIWT study.

In many parts of Europe and South East Asia which are serviced by large rivers and tributaries, the use of inland waterway transport is on the rise. Compared to other modes which are often confronted with congestion and capacity problems, inland waterway transport is characterised by its reliability and has a major unexploited capacity. It is particularly effective and energy-efficient; its energy consumption per ton-kilometre of transported goods corresponds to 1/6 of the consumption on the road and to half of that of rail transport. Recent studies done on the European IWT indicate that the total external costs of inland navigation (in terms of accidents, congestion, noise emissions, air pollution and other environmental impacts) are 7 times lower in than those of road transport.

It is estimated that in 2006, almost 1.98 million passengers travelled by river transport in Sarawak.

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About the Sarawak Rivers Board(SRB)

The Sarawak State Government established the Sarawak Rivers Board (SRB) in October 1993 under the Sarawak Rivers Ordinance 1993. The functions of the SRB stipulated in the Ordinance include multi-purpose river basin planning, control and regulation of river traffic, provision and improvement of ports and navigation facilities, protection and restoration of river banks, implementation of safety measures and river environment management.

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