

Malaysia-Thai border trial extended

Checkpoint to operate round-the-clock until June next year, says Thai envoy

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KUALA LUMPUR: The Bukit Kayu Hitam-Sadao Customs, Immigration and Quarantine (CIQ) checkpoint will operate round-the-clock well into 2020 with Malaysia and Thailand extending the three-month trial period.

The checkpoint, which opened for 24 hours to cargo traffic on June 17, will remain so until June next year to prolong the trial period to one year.

"This will be a boon to businesses and cargo transport operators on both sides of the border," said Thai Ambassador to Malaysia Narong Sasitorn.

"We have observed more trucks coming into Thailand from Malaysia during the extended hours.

"From the Thai side there has not been a significant increase, so we need to create more awareness," he said in an interview.

Both governments had decided earlier to open the checkpoint for 24 hours for three months from April 1, but the move was delayed as the Thais wanted more time to prepare.

Border connectivity was key on the agenda when Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad met his Thai counterpart Gen Prayut Chan-o-cha for talks in Bangkok last October.

Following the prime ministerial initiative, both foreign ministers

New gateway: The newly-built CIQ checkpoint in Sadao will be open 24 hours for cargo traffic travelling between Malaysia and Thailand. (Inset) Sasitorn said the extended hours will help reduce the congestion at the border.



met in the Thai capital in January to reach an agreement to open the border for 24 hours, from the previous 18-hour operation, on a three-month trial basis.

The extra hours are aimed at reducing congestion at the border where there are bottlenecks during rush hour.

Narong said promoting seamless border connectivity remained a top priority to enable businesses on both sides to have complete flexibility to pick the right time to transport their goods and ensure more cost-efficient logistics.

He said latest statistics showed that the number of trucks passing through the Sadao CIQ complex (both ways) was between 12,000 and 13,000 per month, but added that the utilisation of the extra hours was still very low.

During the extended operating hours at the Sadao checkpoint (11pm to 5am Thai time) in June, he said inbound cargo traffic from Bukit Kayu Hitam registered a 2.5% increase, followed by 0.67% (July), 0.56% (August), 0.16% (September) and 0.30% (October).

"The technical team is continuing

to monitor the developments at the shared border. "On my part, I have been in touch with the Songkhla vice-governor to spur things on," the envoy added.

Narong said the new Sadao CIQ complex was near completion and scheduled to be operational by the first quarter of 2020.

He said a decision on the building of a new road alignment to link the

US\$78mil (RM315mil) complex with the Bukit Kayu Hitam Immigration, Customs, Quarantine and Security (ICQS) complex was still pending.

"We have presented two proposals to Malaysia, which has come up with its own suggestion. We need to finalise this to prepare for the opening of the Sadao complex.

"Without a new road alignment, we will have to rely on the existing route.

"But this will not resolve the congestion and bottleneck situation at peak hours with more lorries and trucks waiting to cross," he said, adding that a single inspection facility for all trucks, now randomly inspected at least twice – once in Thailand and in Malaysia – was being explored.

Narong said he had also met Works Minister Baru Bian on the proposals to build a bridge to connect Takbai in Narathiwat to Pengkalan Kubor in Tumpat, Kelantan, and another linking Rantau Panjang, Pasir Mas, to Sungai Golok, also in Narathiwat.

He said the Takbai-Pengkalan Kubor bridge would span 270m and have four lanes.

"If the roads connecting both ends of the bridge are included, the total length of the project will be 10.6km.

"This bridge is long overdue. The economic benefits are indeed immense. Thailand had already proposed the engineering design some years back," he said.