

## SANDAKAN AIRPORT TO BE UPGRADED

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SANDAKAN Airport is poised to be the second main gateway for Sabah after the Kota Kinabalu International Airport once its runway is extended. The runway, which is 2,134m long, will be extended to 2,500m to accommodate bigger aircraft.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak, who launched the project to extend the runway yesterday, said the initiative would allow direct flights from China, South Korea and Japan into the district.

This, he added, was proof that the Federal Government would not hesitate to approve unplanned development projects to benefit the people. "Sandakan needs financial injection or assistance from the Federal Government. "The government can accommodate projects not originally in the development plan such as the runway expansion we heard the people's requests. "When I came to this district in March, I met local operators who said if the runway was upgraded, bigger airplanes on direct flights will bring more tourists, and this will boost hotels' occupancy and businesses," he said yesterday.

Najib shared with his audience how the expansion project took off. "Once I heard that, I called Transport Minister Datuk Seri Liow Tiong Lai and said we must implement the project." I also told Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Abdul Rahman Dahlan, who oversees the Economic Planning Unit, that I 'want this project approved."

Najib said the project would start next month. The contractor had been appointed and issued with the Letter of Intent. It is the same contractor involved in the 2013 upgrading of the airport, where they completed the project the following year.

Najib said with Sandakan's eco- tourism and golf course, the up- graded airport would take the district to greater heights. It was his aspiration, Najib said, to see Sabah developing on a par with the peninsula, adding that the upgrade would have a huge economic impact.

Chief Minister Datuk Seri Musa Aman said Najib had remained committed to the people of Sabah. He said Najib had on Dec 16, 2012, visited Sandakan and found that the airport terminal building was in a dilapidated state.

"At that time, the prime minister gave his commitment and promised the people here that it would be done. The next year, the upgrading work was carried out and completed in 2014.

"This is an example of a leader who cares and listens to the pulse of the people... who works all time for the people, not seasonally," added Musa. Musa said the upgrading of the airport would make Sabah and, particularly, Sandakan a more popular travel destination for foreign tourists, hence turning it into the state's second busiest airport.

Liow said the Federal Government had allocated RM41 million for development of the air sector in Sabah this year. He said the amount was part of the RM79.2 million allocated for the transport sector in the state this year under the 11th Malaysia Plan.

He said last year, RM13.1 million was spent for the development of transport-related infrastructure in Sabah, covering various sectors, of which RM1.4 million was spent on the air sector.

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**SOURCE : NEW STRAITS TIMES | PAGE: 4 | 8 MAY 2017**