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### **Rail transport: Shameful commuter service**

THE Keretapi Tanah Melayu Berhad commuter service needs to be drastically improved. Why are the thousands of commuters who commute daily to work being treated like a herd of cows packed into a pen?

We heed the advice of the prime minister and use the public transport service, which is supposed to be more convenient. The KTM Komuter service should be more efficient in the mornings when people go to work and in the evenings when people leave for home. Regrettably, this is not so.

My question is: why are scheduled trips during peak hours cancelled so frequently? Every time a train is delayed or cancelled, the journey becomes longer.

Has KTMB not thought about the number of unproductive hours caused when people end up being late for work due to cancellation or delayed train service?

I used to take the morning shuttle service scheduled at 7.19am from Shah Alam to KL Sentral. This trip is often cancelled. It has become worse after the Hari Raya Aidilfitri holidays. The service is too infrequent.

I take the Komuter thrice a week and the trips are cancelled on these days. The next train, from Port Klang, will arrive in Shah Alam at 7.34am. The train is delayed for more than an hour.

Why was the shuttle service scheduled at 7.19am, plying the Jalan Kastam-Batu Caves route, cancelled from Sept 13 to 15, Sept 20 to 24 and Sept 27 to Oct 1? These are just a few dates that I have recorded. The peak-hour trips are still being cancelled.

KTMB is cancelling trips too often. My organisation doesn't allow late attendance for more than three days in a month. On Oct 11, my name was taken again for being late for work. If I am given a show cause letter, KTMB should be made answerable to my organisation.

Don't suggest that I take the earlier train from Port Klang, arriving at 7.04am in Shah Alam, as it is equally bad. A friend of mine, who also boards in Shah Alam, takes the commuter train at the absurd hour of 6am to avoid the rush, which starts as early as 6.30am, as she is asthmatic. Crazy, isn't it?

We should have an "efficient" transport system, especially in the capital city, in order to have good quality of life.

By the time the Port Klang train reaches Shah Alam, it is already three-quarters full. Meanwhile, the crowd in Shah Alam would have built up. People become agitated and both courtesy and manners fly out the window.

Everyone starts to push in an effort to enter the train for the simple reason that they do not want to be late for work. For those who are not pushing, they will eventually be pushed. There is no such thing as a "queue".

Has any of KTMB's management team taken a ride during this period, let alone station a staff member at stations to monitor the crowd situation?

The evening trips of the Batu Caves-Port Klang route are no better. The scheduled trips -- whether the normal or shuttle service (Batu Caves-Jalan Kastam) -- are frequently cancelled. The shuttle services in the evening (arrival time at the Bank Negara station at 6.15pm and 6.44pm) have been cancelled since the Hari Raya Aidilfitri holidays. How long is this going to carry on? Why hasn't the public been informed about this?

We have to go through the same chaotic situation experienced in the morning. This is very stressful.

On Sept 29, I boarded the train en-route to Port Klang from the BNM station at 7.04pm. I was told there had been no train since 6.28pm. The train was packed when it left the Bank Negara station. People started pushing at the KL Sentral station and the crowd there was worse. Despite it being a women's coach, there

was no shortage of screaming and swearing among the passengers.

The force of being pushed was so great that people forgot about the gap between the platform and the train. Student Esther Lai Keat Ee of Shah Alam was pushed so hard that she lost her balance and had her left thigh trapped in the gap between the train and platform. Her thigh was bruised and she was in pain. Is KTMB going to wait for a major accident to happen before it realises the inconvenience and danger it is posing to passengers?

I had the misfortune of fainting in the train on two occasions. Imagine being in a packed coach without air-conditioning. It is difficult to express the discomfort, frustration and anger one feels. I invite the top management team to cramp themselves in the train with us and tell us if they liked their journey.

Sorry KTMB, you fail to meet one of your taglines, that is empathy. Please put yourselves in the shoes of pregnant women, the old, the handicapped and people with health problems. We pay for the trip and expect a pleasant and decent ride. Yet, things are so bad. We are not asking for seats to sit on. The least we ask for is space to stand in properly at a comfortable distance from the next person. Instead, we are constantly being pushed and have our feet stepped on numerous times.

We cannot even stand in a straight position. We have to squeeze our bodies into the little space available. We are sandwiched between people. We have to tolerate the stench of stale sweat and feel the wetness against our bodies.

To make matters worse, polis bantuan at the KL Sentral station force people to move to the end of the coach. This beats logic as some of the coaches have nothing for the passengers to hold on to.

A few years ago, KTMB boastfully advertised in its trains on the huge number of passengers commuting daily in the Komuter.

Where is the money collected from the fares being channelled to? Why is the service not upgraded? Why are new routes being introduced when the existing ones need drastic improvement? Is the ringgit more important than the welfare of passengers? KTMB is duty-bound to provide its passengers a decent and safe journey.

Obviously, something is not right with the management of KTMB. How can we be a developed nation when the transport system is this bad? If the management needs to be changed, then let it be so.

Please do not push our patience to its limit and wait for a mishap to occur before proactive action is taken. Every commuter using KTMB's service wants to spend quality time with their families and not waste time at the train stations or in the trains.

The bottomline: trips should be more frequent during peak hours. People are more relaxed when the trains are more frequent and arrive on schedule. Ten minutes apart would be the best. Please don't go beyond 15 minutes.

The public is hoping for a better, safer and more reliable rail transport system within the city. Please don't take their complaints lightly.

**SHOBY NAIR, Shah Alam, Selangor**

***Reply to "Shameful commuter service", NST 20 Oct 2010***

***We would like to thank Shoby Nair for his constructive comments and feedbacks pertaining to commuter services on Batu Caves – Port Klang line. We understand his frustrations with regards to the KTM Komuter service and we are fully aware of all the problems faced by the commuters. But rest assured that we are taking every possible step to fix the problems and restore customers' faith in our service.***

***We admit that our train sets were having major technical problems during those dates mentioned by Mr Shoby, and the problem took, on the average, 3 – 7 days to be fixed. During the said period, we also experienced an unforeseen circumstance whereby we suffered from low availability of hybrid sets for shuttle services.***

***It is a fact that, with the current capacity, we can only take a certain number of passengers during the peak hour. Essentially, this is caused by passengers choosing to travel all at the same time during the peak periods rather than adjusting the travel time to slightly off-peak times. It is true that supply has exceeded demands.***

***We are having these problems simply because we are using an ageing fleet of 15-year old EMUs that have not been attended to properly. Like a 10-year old car, it will never be as good as a brand new one. Similarly, as we grow old, that is when you would start having diabetes, heart problems, lost of stamina and so on. It is a common problem that we all face every day.***

***Anyway, that is not an excuse. In fact, we are doing something even better for the commuting public. To meet this growing demand, the simple solution is to get a new set of trains. That is exactly what we are doing now as we have already placed an order for 38 six-car trains that will more than double the existing capacity. But then, it will take a good 12-18 months for them to come.***

***Before that, I believe that the commuters need to understand certain facts before hurling wild accusations at the Management of KTMB for not doing anything.***

***Firstly, the KTM double track constructed in 1995 was not designed to provide a high frequency commuter service like the RapidKL LRT systems with frequencies of every 2 to 3 minutes. To expect the current KTM Komuter system to provide a high frequency commuter service is like asking a Proton Saga to compete in a Formula 1 race. It is not meant to be.***

***Today, even if we have 100 EMUs, we cannot provide a train every 5 minutes because the system is not designed in that way. Furthermore, KTMB is also handling a mix bag of rail traffic comprising of cargo, intercity, commuter & ETS, unlike the dedicated LRT and Monorail systems.***

***I hope the public appreciates that we are not a dedicated commuter service, hence, the greater challenge of providing a consistent and reliable service like RapidKL.***

***Whatever it is, under the NKRA, KTMB have been given the task to improve the commuter service with a headway of 7.5 minutes during the peak hours, as what Shoby Nair would like to have.***

***However, before that can happen, just like a racing car, we have to do a lot of modifications to the current system. It is not simply a case of buying new rolling stocks. In a train system, lots of other things need to be done before the new trains can improve the frequency of the commuter service in a regular, consistent and safe manner. Basically, we are looking at almost a total revamp of the entire commuter system.***

***Firstly, we need to construct a new depot at Seremban to cater for the new 6-car trainsets as we do not have such facility here except in Batu Gajah, Perak. Secondly, to cater for the high frequency, we need to improve the signalling system, especially at the congested area within and around KL Sentral. As we are going to be running more trains at the same time, we would need to add in more power to the overhead power supply. In addition to that, we also need to upgrade the communication and Passenger Information System so that accurate information can be transmitted to the passengers.***

*In anticipation for the higher demands, we are also upgrading the Automatic Fare Collection system with a new one that can integrate with the LRT systems to replace the obsolete system that we have right now. This new AFC system will bring greater benefits to the commuters in terms of faster and more reliable transaction at the gates.*

*The Government have thus made a bold decision to upgrade the KTM Komuter system with an investment of around RM 2 billion ringgit. However, commuters will have to wait for another year or so before we can see the changes in the KTM Komuter service. The KTM Komuter will then undergo a total transformation, thanks to the NKRA initiatives introduced by the Government.*

*We have also been looking at some innovative ways to improve our commuter service, even under the current critical condition. The Ladies' Pink coach was an innovative idea to provide a better service as 70% of the commuters are females.*

*Meanwhile, we will endeavour to continue to maintain the ageing fleet in the best way that we can and to supplement it with other services when they are available. Rest assured we are not sitting in our laurels.*

*We recently managed to minimize the percentage of train cancellations. In addition to that, from 4th October 2010, we have introduced one 6-car Electric Train Set (ETS) for commuter service during the morning and evening peak for the Seremban – Sg Buluh mainline. We have received very positive feedbacks from our customers as the six-car ETS set has significantly helped to reduce congestions during peak hours.*

*We recently carried out a passenger survey on 8 October 2010 to assess the new measures that we have introduced and 97% of the commuters said that they are satisfied with our service. Of course, we can never please everybody but we know that majority of commuter users are satisfied with the new measures. With that, we plan to utilise one more ETS for commuter services, soonest possible, to further improve the commuter services for the Port Klang – Batu Caves line.*

*Given the current state of the commuter trains, we believe that we have done every possible means to improve the commuter service. Based on the commuter travel patterns and the numerous feedbacks that we have received from the passengers, our commuter time table and frequency have been revised to cater to the majority of the passengers. I am afraid that we cannot cater to a certain specific demand by a passenger.*

*We therefore would like to advise that commuter users should adjust to the planned travel times of the Commuter service and to avoid the rush hours as far as possible. All of us understand that if we know that certain roads are jammed at 7.30 am, we will endeavour to come out from our house earlier, may be at around 7.00 am instead. It is the same here as most commuters chose to travel at about the same time.*

*During the period that the EMUs availability is good, we noticed that passengers sometimes chose to cram themselves into a particular train whilst the next train, 15 minutes later, was almost empty. Sometimes, we do observe that passengers ignore some of the travel advice made by our station masters and ground staffs and yet, at the end of it, we still get blamed for providing a crowded train.*

***By the second quarter of 2011, we will also embark on the refurbishment of our 15 old trains. With this initiative, the commuters can expect the frequency to improve progressively. By the final quarter of next year, we will be receiving the first 6 out of the new 38 six-car sets.***

***We are fully aware of the need for an immediate result in order to deliver a safer, more comfortable and reliable commuter service. The complaints raised by the public, every now and then, cannot, however, be solved overnight. Nevertheless, we have already taken the necessary steps to resolve them once and for all as we are highly committed to achieve the NKRA target of improving the use of public transportation in the Klang Valley by 2012.***

***While some of the public criticisms are unwarranted, we nevertheless welcome your ideas and suggestions to improve the commuter service. We are here to serve you. Your patronage is important for us as serving you is our business.***

***Thank you.***

***Dr Aminuddin Adnan***

***President, KTM Berhad***