

## CONSTRUCTION OF SUBMARINE CABLES IS NOT THE SOLUTION

PRESS RELEASE 13 JANUARY 2007. Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM) deeply regrets the Federal Government's decision today [13.01.2007] to go ahead with the revival of the submarine cable component of the Bakun Hydroelectric Project in Sarawak, despite strong concerns from NGOs that this project is not only exorbitant financially but is also environmentally unsound.

The submarine cable proposal although first shelved by the Government in 1999 following financial difficulties is being revived again to channel the excess supply of power from Sarawak to the Peninsular. Energy, Water and Communications Minister Datuk Seri Dr Lim Keng Yaik said that the argument for the revival is that hydro power will form the alternative to natural gas and fossil fuel derived power.

Reviving the submarine cables is akin to finding new ways to using a technology which is considered obsolete in many developed countries especially when they are moving towards other cleaner, efficient, renewable and environmentally friendly energy resources, none of which hydro electric energy is.

The Government should in fact be clear and transparent in its energy resource planning for future energy needs including developing and promoting Malaysia's potential in other cleaner energy technologies for example solar energy. SAM has also come to learn that operations in the warm waters would apparently result in the cables weighing around 60 kg per meter, and at a length of 700 km, would result in the entire system to end up weighing 42,000 tonnes. With multiple cables, the figure could easily triple. Ships may have to be specially re-designed or specifically built to lay the cables. Large expenses will also be incurred in locating and preparing the seabed trenches to lay the cables as well as in building maintenance stations. Further, transmission loss and maintenance works in the future will continue to pose technical and financial challenges to the project proponents. Project delays or technical problems during the cabling process would also result in budget overruns, which the country can ill-afford at the moment.

Further, the undersea cable poses very serious environmental problems. The past couple of years have shown the volatile nature of the tectonic plate movements which have caused major and minor earthquakes both undersea and on land around this region, triggering tsunamis and causing human and financial losses. This shows the vulnerability of the underwater eco-system surrounding the Indonesian and Malaysian waters. The recent earthquake in Taiwan which also damaged the underwater telecommunication cables is proof enough to show the impacts that may befall on these submarine cables. Given these changes in the environment in the last 2 years, the construction of the submarine cables will not be a viable option. Any major disaster in the surrounding area may adversely affect the project and the cost involved may not be only in financial terms.

In addition, another important issue which many are still unaware of is the fact that for the most part of it, the South China Sea between the Peninsula and Borneo is under the marine territories of Indonesia. As such, the bulk of the cables will in fact be passing through Indonesian waters, which can give rise to diplomatic and security concerns. Although there is a current bilateral treaty which allows Malaysia to build cables connecting the Peninsula with Sabah and Sarawak, legal complications and possibly issues on financial payments will have to be addressed.

SAM strongly believes that having arrived at this difficult juncture of wanting to justify the excess power from Bakun, the wisest option for the government today is to actually scale down the project to avoid incurring further financial losses and environmental destruction. SAM is certainly troubled that the government is still mulling to resolve Bakun through exorbitant and high-stake options which are beset with their own limitations, not to mention their abilities to generate more ecological, social and ultimately financial damages.

In any event, if the Government continues to go ahead with the construction of the submarine cables, despite adverse views, SAM demands that a detailed Environmental Impact Assessment (DEIA) is commissioned given the change in the surrounding circumstances as this is a Federal Government project. Further, the DEIA must undergo a complete and transparent public participation process.

-sgd-S.M. Mohamed Idris President