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Rafizi: Malaysia, Singapore to set up task force to study establishment of special economic zone in Johor.



Economy Minister Rafizi Ramli and the republic's National Development Minister Desmond Lee at a joint press conference in Singapore, July 14, 2023. — Picture from Twitter/Bernamea

SINGAPORE, July 14 — Malaysia and Singapore have agreed to set up a special task force to study the establishment of a Johor-Singapore special economic zone.

The special task force will report its progress to the leaders when they meet at the upcoming Malaysia-Singapore Leaders' Retreat scheduled for October this year.

This was announced by Malaysia's Economy Minister Rafizi Ramli and the republic's National Development Minister Desmond Lee at a joint press conference here today.

Earlier, both ministers co-chaired the 16th Meeting of the Joint Ministerial Committee for Iskandar Malaysia (JMCIM) at Shangri-la Hotel.

The idea to establish the Johor-Singapore special economic zone was mooted by Rafizi.

"We have a new administration in Malaysia and it yearns that we work as closely as possible with our partners in this region and around the world, (what more with) a partner with a shared heritage like Singapore," said Rafizi.

He noted that Singapore and Johor have had much more connectivity in the last two to three decades, regardless of how the politics progress in Singapore and Malaysia, or between the two countries.

“The fact of the matter is the flow of people, goods, and services between Singapore and Malaysia will continue to grow,” said Rafizi, adding that both countries should leverage each other’s strengths.

“Singapore has its advantages and better reach in some areas. Johor has its resources and its advantages. If we were to go separately on our own, we will be limited in terms of the possibility of investments and economic value that we can create (together),” he said.

“More importantly, I hope it will signify our belief that the only way forward is to embrace competition and connectivity in the most positive way,” he said.

Thus, Rafizi said the good work of JMCIM working groups over the last 15 years should be elevated onto a more comprehensive special economic zone.

“We have set some parameters as a starting point. Officials from Malaysia and Singapore will begin to draft (the terms of reference) and we hope to put a more definitive vision for this (special economic zone) for us to update our leaders,” he said.

He opined that the special zone will “bring a lot of warmth and good expectations for more things to come from Singapore and Johor in the years ahead.”

Meanwhile, Lee said the special economic zone will benefit the people of Johor, Malaysia and Singapore as it will enhance the economies on both sides of the causeway, provide a tremendous value proposition that build on the strengths and attractiveness of both and bring about tangible benefits in terms of jobs and livelihoods.

On the timeline and focus areas for the formation of the special economic zone, Lee said the first task of the special task force is to draft the terms of reference and the areas of collaboration.

“That will be the first piece of work they have to do. However, the JCMIM will not start with a blank canvas as we have had many years of collaboration.

“In fact, many work groups have done very good work (related to) transport connectivity, innovation, business ecosystem, environment, tourism, technical and skills training,” he said, adding that much of the previous work done will be geared in support of the vision.

“Of course, (there are) many (more) things to be discussed, but I think the key is to underline the vision, and to set out the spirit to pursue this endeavour,” he said.

Rafizi said there is a need to harmonise ideas and vision and there is much to be ironed out to create the economic value to make the package more attractive.

“If we want to operate and function as an economic union, as an economic region, we have to try our best to make it as seamless as possible,” he said.

Rafizi said there is a need to harmonise issues like immigration and customs but these are still early days. — Bernama