

## PRESS RELEASE

Newspaper : SPEAK UP  
Date : 6 JUNE 2014  
Section/Page : theSun ON FRIDAY  
Color : Color

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theSun ON FRIDAY | JUNE 6, 2014

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# MB needs to drive Iskandar Malaysia

## JUST JOHOR

BY ROY K. NANDI

**F**OUR Johoreans, all foreign educated, got together recently for a casual chitchat over *teh-tarik*. The lively banter inevitably turned to Iskandar Malaysia. One of them then popped the question: What exactly is Iskandar Malaysia? "Isn't this the new company that runs bus services," came the shocking answer from another person in the group.

A great many people in Johor have no affinity with this entity called Iskandar Malaysia. Despite all the hype and hullabaloo, they can't relate with it. They have no clue if this is yet one more government department, public corporation, or as pointed out by the young upstart earlier, another bus company.

The problem has a lot to do with branding. Iskandar Malaysia is such an enormous conurbation - it is three times the size of Singapore or 48 times the size of Putrajaya - that people just can't seem to relate with it.

To exacerbate this confusion, there is no single icon or landmark to encapsulate this entire special economic zone otherwise known as the southern growth corridor.

Even after eight years in the making, the man in the street is still unable to fathom if Iskandar Malaysia is Nusajaya, Danga Bay, Madini, Puteri Harbour or Legoland.

With five flagship zones spread over an incredible 2,217 sq km, the sheer size and scope of this growth corridor is enough to rattle, if not confound the ordinary Johorean.

This is unlike Shenzhen in China, Bengaluru in India or Batam Island in Indonesia which are all easily identifiable single entities with unique specialities.

So vast is our growth corridor that it is hard to point your finger to a spot on the

map and say this is Iskandar Malaysia. It covers Johor Baru, Nusajaya, the Western Gate (comprising Port of Tanjung Pelepas) the Eastern Gate (Pasir Gudang and Tanjung Langsat) and Senai-Skudai zone.

As if this is not a case of biting more than one can chew, recent news reports seem to indicate new plans to enlarge the land area under Iskandar Malaysia to even include the massive oil and gas installations being planned in Pengerang on the southeast coast of Johor.

A grandiose Iskandar Malaysia may be good for the ego, but for ordinary Johoreans it is meaningless because it has little or virtually no impact on their lives.

The Iskandar Regional Development Authority (IRDA), which is the custodian of Iskandar Malaysia, is often proud to declare that it has secured over RM90 billion in committed investments in this growth corridor since its inception.

But you can't help but wonder why real wages have not gone up despite these incredibly large inflow of foreign direct capital. Here are some anecdotal evidences:

A waiter at a golf and country club in Kempas, for instance, is still being paid RM5 an hour and the status quo has not changed for years.

Factory production workers within Iskandar Malaysia receive less than RM1,200 in actual wages each month or a pathetic average of RM30 a day.

This begs the question: how has Iskandar Malaysia impacted the lives of ordinary people in Johor? With all the hot money flowing in, why are wages still stagnant?

The only tangible impact of Iskandar Malaysia is the soaring increase in land and property prices, including rentals. But this

has become the bane of normal working people, instead of a boon.

You only have to walk through isolated shophouses in Gelang Patah, Senai or Ulu Tiram to find scores of workers crammed inside because they cannot afford to rent houses or rooms. And I am not talking about foreign workers, which is another story.

It is time that IRDA did a comprehensive social impact study to find out exactly how Iskandar Malaysia has impacted simple, ordinary people in Johor.

No point trying to impress the rakyat with all these high-sounding numbers when lives have not changed and people are still finding it a struggle to make ends meet. There is obviously a disconnect between the policymakers in IRDA and the man in the street.

Perhaps it is also time Mentri Besar Datuk Seri Khaled Nordin took the bull (IRDA) by the horns and steered it to a new direction. After all, the mentri besar, together with the prime minister, is the joint chairman of IRDA.

There is a desperate need to infuse new blood and give it a new lease of life. Iskandar Malaysia has reached a plateau over the past two-odd years with no new major investment or projects.

Unless something dramatic is done, IRDA will sink to become another government organisation. And the change has to start from the top. Khaled has to crack the whip to give Iskandar Malaysia a new focus and direction.



Khaled ... also joint chairman of IRDA.

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