

Ban is torque of the town

Hauliers blow a fuse but car users hail move to ease jams



A view of heavy traffic along Jalan Chain Ferry in Prai, Butterworth, during peak hours.

— Photos: MUSTAFA AHMAD/
The Star

THE hundreds of lorries and trailers that clog up Butterworth's Jalan Chain Ferry at peak hours are banned from doing so starting Monday, sending waves of relief among motorists but cries of unfair treatment from hauliers and factories.

Factories fear this ban will erode their productivity while hauliers feel the ban will only create congestion elsewhere.

From Monday, any vehicle heavier than five tonnes face a fine of RM300 if they traverse the 3.5km stretch of Jalan Chain Ferry between the Jalan Assumption interchange and Jalan Baru junction from 6.30am to 8.30am and 5pm to 7pm daily excluding public holidays.

It is infamous for being chock-full of large trailers because it links North Butterworth Container Terminal (NBCT) with Prai Industrial Estate and even Kulim Hi-Tech Park while connecting the heart of town with many residential estates.

"What a relief!" Ooi Eng Koon, 35, an engineer living in Taman Inderawasih, exclaimed after learning about the ban.

Calling Jalan Chain Ferry a "dreadful stretch", she said she felt like celebrating after years of struggling with the jam there.

"I live less than two kilometres from my factory in Prai, but driving to work sometimes takes over 30 minutes because there are so many heavy trailers," she said.

Kindergarten teacher Siti Nur Hasmah, 28, from Seberang Jaya, observed that jams happen because heavy vehicles are slow to accelerate when the lights turn green.

"Sometimes only two trailers get to cross with each green light, and they always take up both lanes," she said.

The ban has left hauliers and factories frustrated.

Association of Malaysian Hauliers northern region chairman P. Assiappan objects to the ban



A signboard put up at Jalan Chain Ferry stating that heavy vehicles are barred from using the stretch at peak hours.

saying that hauliers, as stakeholders, were never consulted.

"We also pay road tax and more than 90% of us need that road to reach NBCT every day.

"Our customers (factories) will be the first to feel the effect, and we will be blamed again when we congest other roads," he said.

Lashing out at the state administration and Road Transport Department, Amaiappan felt the absence of consultation with hauliers was a sign of a lack of experience in public governance.

Federation of Malaysian Manufacturers (FMM) Penang chairman Datuk Dr Ooi Eng Hock said he worried that the ban will affect the productivity of at least 100 decades-old small and medium industries in Taman Limbungan, Taman Limbungan Indah and Kampung Perlis because the road is their only access.

"From the port, trailers with cargo containers reach Prai

Industrial Estate via Jalan Chain Ferry after crossing the flyover in front of Taman Inderawasih.

"But there is no exit to Prai Industrial Estate from Butterworth Outer Ring Road (BORR). They will need to take the exit towards Penang Bridge and join the jam from Bukit Mertajam and Juru to reach the factories," he explained.

Dr Ooi said factories could cope with the morning ban but the 5pm to 7pm ban would wreak havoc on their productivity.

Penang Port Sdn Bhd chief executive officer V. Sasedharan agrees with Dr Ooi, pointing out that 6.30am to 8.30am is low-peak hours for NBCT but it faces the heaviest traffic from 5pm to 7pm.

"If trailers unload in NBCT in the late afternoons but dare not leave the terminal because of the ban, we can end up with a terrible bottleneck here," he said.

Local authorities, for now, refuse to budge.

Seberang Prai Municipal Council (MPSP) president Datuk Rozali Mohamad said heavy vehicles want to use Jalan Chain Ferry as it is shorter and toll-free, "and up to 400 of them use it during peak hours".

"Factories can adjust their timing or use the PLUS highway or BORR," he said.

MPSP councillor David Marshel said the municipal council proposed the ban in 2014 while approval from the Federal Government was obtained this July.

He felt heavy vehicle drivers were reluctant to use BORR as they wanted to save on toll.

"BORR was specifically designed to connect factories to NBCT and they should make use of it," he said, adding that the ban is permanent and not a trial run.

The ban was announced on Tuesday by Deputy Chief Minister II Dr P. Ramasamy, who is also Prai assemblyman.