

## AVIATION

# Newly opened Betong airport spurs high hopes for tourism

## POST REPORTERS

Betong airport in Yala officially opens today, raising hope it will revitalise tourism and the economy in the country's southernmost district.

The airport received an operating licence from the Civil Aviation Authority of Thailand (CAAT) on Jan 28, said Transport Minister Saksayam Chidchob.

It is the 29th airport to come under Department of Airports (DOA) supervision.

The air link to Betong provides a safe and convenient alternative to road travel which cut through mountainous terrain, observers say.

The 920-rai airport is capable of handling up to 300 passengers an

hour or 800,000 a year, according to Mr Saksayam.

Owned and operated by the DOA, the new airport is about 13 kilometres east of downtown Betong.

The facility has one 1,800-metre runway that can accommodate small, 80-seater turboprops such as the ATR-72 or the Bombardier Q-400. Its passenger terminal covers 7,000 sqm.

Nok Air launches its inaugural flight to Betong airport today. The airline will operate three scheduled flights a week on Monday, Wednesday and Friday.

The transport minister added Betong airport has potential to become a regional aviation hub for air travel between Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore.

Narin Ruengwongsak, vice president

of the Betong Tourism Business Association, said the airport's opening puts Betong in high relief on the tourism map.

Travel to the district, which has many tourist attractions, will get easier, he said.

He added that tourism businesses in nearby provinces had inquired about the planned opening and are now preparing tour packages to receive more customers from Bangkok and beyond.

Kanpong Limkanchana, chairman of Yala Chamber of Commerce, said the airport has kindled hope for increased tourism in the district.

He estimated the new facility will help double the number of tourist arrivals in Betong, which currently stands at 2,000 a day.