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12 MOUs for MSC projects signed

Hardev Kaur in London

LONDON, Wed: Twelve memorandums of understanding have been signed to facilitate various applications in the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC), including one for a revolutionary "electronic purse" which is a "wallet computer" the size of a credit card.

The main areas of focus of the MOUs signed in the presence of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad are education, training, application development and telecommunications.

The electronic purse, or e-pass, according to Xanadu Plc, a smart card and communications group, will be truly smart and multi-purpose. It can save and display data, perform the functions of multiple cards, allow communication, and even act as a personal computer. It has been patented in 39 countries worldwide, including the US and Europe.

The e-pass is small enough to fit into a wallet and can be programmed to function as a credit card, various membership cards, access control device, and a passport. It comes with a display screen on which vital health and personal data can be accessed.

According to Xanadu, many organisations and prominent entrepreneurs, including Bill Gates of Microsoft, have expressed interest in the e-pass.

Gates predicted that the wallet PC will be in the market in a year's time and had told a conference in Los Angeles last November that "it will be a pocket computer with a snapshot-size colour screen that you will use instead for much of what you may carry around with you today - money and items that authenticate who you are, such as keys, identification, credit cards and tickets of various kinds, as well as items that provide you with mobile information and communications, such as a watch, newspapers or other reading material, address and appointment books, photographs, calculator, portable telephone and pager."

The MOU will provide for research, development, design and manufacture of the e-pass for export from the MSC. The plant, which calls for an additional STG6 million in investments, is expected to be operational by end-1998.

The agreement will see the Malaysian partner, TL Technology Research, design, develop and manufacture a prototype of the e-pass at technologically advanced facilities in the MSC.

The plant, marking a quantum leap in technology for Malaysia, will be a cutting edge facility with Xanadu's E-Pass International serving as consultants. In fact, the smart passport, the first of its kind in the world, is expected to be out by the end of the year.

According to Xanadu, with hundreds of uses having been established, the circulation of smart cards is expected to increase 10-fold from 420 million in 1994 to four billion by early in the next millennium.

Another joint venture in the making, with the signing of the MOU between Ascom and Lityan Holdings Bhd, will pay particular attention on one of the seven flagship applications - borderless marketing. The partners will use MSC as a launchpad to promote their products and technical services throughout the region.

The MSC has fired the imagination of the information technology and multimedia world, resulting in Dr Mahathir becoming highly sought after for "consulting services" not unlike those he had offered when he was a practising medical doctor. Only this time, the Prime Minister is dispensing "high-tech" medicine for whatever might ail the MSC.

He continued with his hectic pace and held individual meetings with chief executive officers, explaining and elaborating on the "best and the boldest project".

Among those who met Dr Mahathir was Ericsson President and Chief Executive Officer Dr Lars Ramqvist, who has been invited to be a member of the MSC International Advisory Panel. Others in the 35-member panel, chaired by Dr Mahathir himself, include Jim Barksdale (Netscape), Larry Ellison (Oracle), Bill Gates (Microsoft), Nobuyji Idei (Sony), Lou Gerstener (IBM), Bon Moo Koo (Lucky Goldstar), Jim Manzi, Scott McNealy (Sun Microsystems), Kenichi Ohmae, Eckhard Pfeiffer (Compaq), Lewis Platt (Hewlett Packard), Hasso Plattner (SAP) and Masayoshi Son (Softbank).

The Prime Minister was also briefed on the use of telemedicine, one of the flagship applications being promoted for the MSC. He observed a laparoscopic cholecystectomy via a live link-up with an operating theatre at St Mary's Hospital in London, and also participated in a live link-up with the IMR and with Yale University in the US.