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Businessmen, Press show keen interest

Ahmad Talib; Rashid Yusof in London

DATUK Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad held court twice on Tuesday in London, fielding questions from European businessmen and journalists on the Multimedia Super Corridor, Malaysia's business philosophy and the role of corporations in today's borderless world.

The Prime Minister was very much in his element as he took to the rostrum at the MSC investors conference at the Imperial College, known for its achievements in science, technology and medicine.

This was soon followed by a packed Press conference at one of the lecture halls.

At the MSC conference, the Prime Minister was first asked to comment on Malaysia's attempt to devise a smart card as one of the intended applications of the MSC.

Responding, the Prime Minister said the Government was looking at several proposals but it was willing to hear fresh ones on the smart card.

One participant asked what was the reaction from Malaysia's Asean partners on the MSC and whether the MSC was intended only for the East Asian market.

Dr Mahathir said Malaysia was not going to compete with its Asean neighbours on information technology.

"We'd rather work with them in as many areas as possible," he said.

"In fact, we'd probably bring it up for discussion at the Asean Summit end of the year."

When a senior executive of a German firm wanted to know whether venture capital was forthcoming for MSC experiments, Dr Mahathir said he was confident that capital was available if the project was viable.

"One must remember that some IT-related successes began with just garage experiments," he said.

"Of course there's a risk of putting in a lot of money and ending up losing your shirt... but you may end up making a pile."

One participant, while praising the Prime Minister for his Vision 2020 agenda, asked how conflicts could be avoided in the next millenium, especially when some companies wield far greater political and economic power over some nations.

"Well, conglomerates have to come to some agreement regarding what is good or bad for the world," responded Dr Mahathir.

"In today's borderless world, this must be done... everyone is talking about a borderless world, but we've not yet got the norms for this."

At the Press conference soon after, the Prime Minister was asked why Telekom Malaysia Bhd was given a major portion of work related to the MSC, especially in terms of supplying equipment to some of its operations.

"This gave the impression that Telekom Malaysia was given a monopoly of the MSC," the journalist said.

While Dr Mahathir dismissed as not true that Telekom Malaysia was given a monopoly, he said this was the "best approach for the moment".

"Telekom Malaysia would only install the backbone of the MSC's needs while other companies would be involved in many other ways as well," he said.

"Companies also need incentives to start major undertakings."

Asked whether small and medum-scale companies would be given special protection to enter the MSC, Dr Mahathir said the project was meant for all.

"There would not be special protection for SMIs as this would discourage big companies from coming in," he added.

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