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Chance to reap rewards of Information Age

Calvin Goh in Los Angeles

MALAYSIA has offered the world a special green field environment designed to enable companies to collaborate in new ways and reap the rich rewards of the Information Age.

"There are no legacies of artificial constraints created and perpetuated by entrenched interest," Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said in his speech on 'Global Bridges to the Information Age' at the Los Angeles Conference for Investors on the Multimedia Super Corridor at the University of California Los Angeles.

"We offer the Multimedia Super Corridor as a gift to the world - a global bridge to the Information Age that will enable genuine mutual enrichment for our partners possessing the vision to participate."

The Prime Minister said the MSC was truly a world first - the creation of a region with the infrastructure, laws, policies, and practices that would enable companies to explore the Information Age without the usual constraints which frustrate them.

Covering an area 15km by 50km, the MSC runs from the world's tallest buildings in the Kuala Lumpur City Centre, down to what will be the region's largest airport - the KL International Airport in Sepang - when it opens early next year.

And in the audience to listen to his speech, Dr Mahathir noted were both present and future shapers of the Information Age.

The present represented by the leadership of many of the area's most dynamic content and high technology companies, and the future by the university students who will provide the future leadership of the private and public sectors.

Malaysia, Dr Mahathir said, would be changing the way its people lived and worked particularly within the MSC.

"This special area will be a global 'test bed' for new roles of government, new cyberlaws and guarantees, collaborations between Government and companies, companies and companies, education, delivery of healthcare, and applications of new technologies.

"We are looking for smart partnership - win/win/win relationships between companies and Government," he said.

"For example, we will no longer require multimedia companies to go through a traditional 'Request for Proposal' process that requires us to have crystal clear concept of what the company must deliver.

"Leading companies told us this was inappropriate for new areas of multimedia where solutions are developed farther than assembled from existing knowledge," he said.

Instead of traditional tenders and RFPs, the Government would ask companies for 'concept proposals' that describe the approach they would take to developing solutions or achieving the benefits "we requested".

"This will allow us to select a consortium of companies as a smart partner to innovate new products and services in the MSC," he said.

In short, Malaysia is taking a single-minded approach to developing the country using the new tools offered by the Information Age.

Dr Mahathir also expected to see seven specific applications being developed in the MSC by 'webs' of international and Malaysian companies.

This includes Malaysia having the world's first national multi-purpose smart card.

"A single platform will have the individual's ID and electronic

signature and access to Government, banking, credit, telephone, transport and club services.

"Of course, security will be critical but the technology is, I believe, already here to enable all of these services to be offered on one secure platform.

"Imagine the convenience as we are freed from having to carry a huge number of plastic cards and selecting one every time we need to use a card.

"Imagine the opportunity for companies of having no uncertainty that this one card will be in the hands of every Malaysian," he said.

The other applications are Malaysia being a pioneer in electronic Government, having a comprehensive programme for smart-schools and being a regional centre for telemedicine.

He also hoped the MSC would become a collaborative cluster of academic and corporate research and development centre, using distance learning to produce world-class graduates and next-generation innovations.

This sixth application is that it becomes a remote manufacturing co-ordination and engineering support that electronically enables companies in high-cost countries to access plants across Malaysia and Asia as virtual extensions of their domestic operations.

And lastly, that the MSC becomes a marketing and multimedia customer service hub leveraging Malaysia's unique multicultural links to provide electronic publishing, content localisation, telemarketing and remote customer care to a market of 2.5 billion people.

Dr Mahathir said that over time, each of these flagship applications would generate a web of world-class and Malaysian companies collaborating to develop and deliver innovative products and services.

Beyond Malaysia, the MSC becomes a global bridge when its web is interlinked with those of other regions around the world.

"The breadth of what I am describing has probably never been attempted anywhere else in the world. You may be thinking, 'why Malaysia?'"

He gave four reasons. They are:

- * Malaysia's physical location at the centre of Asean and its multicultural links with the biggest Asian markets is unique;
- * Malaysia still has a cost advantage as compared to the 'tigers' in the region;
- * The newness of multimedia to Malaysia provides an important advantage - the country has no inherited systems or entrenched interests determined to defend their current positions; and,
- * Malaysia is highly committed to making the MSC a success and it has a track record of meeting its commitments.

Dr Mahathir said that Malaysia was also looking at the possibility of creating a new Cyber Court of Justice as an international centre to look into some tough questions whose answers must cross borders like how intellectual property rights of knowledge-based products and services can be defined and protected.

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