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Dr M: Malaysia still attractive to investors despite competition

Calvin Goh; Zainul Ariffin in San Francisco

THE fact that multinationals continue to invest in Malaysia suggests that the country is still attractive to them despite competition from its neighbours, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said.

"There must then be something good about Malaysia," he told the audience on Wednesday when presenting his speech entitled "Global bridges in the Information Age" at the Stanford University in Palo Alto, about an hour's drive from San Francisco.

"We have been competing (with our neighbours) all the time. Sometimes we work together and sometimes we compete."

He was responding to a question from the audience on Malaysia's ability to compete with other countries in the region, such as Singapore and Hong Kong, in attracting investors in the area of information technology, or IT.

Competition in itself was not something to be worried about, he said, as all Asean countries, who are themselves fellow competitors in the global marketplace, had done well.

"This is because we co-operate while competing with each other. We also learn from each other's mistakes."

The talk organised by the university's Graduate School of Business is one of the stops in Dr Mahathir's mission to introduce the proposed Multimedia Super Corridor to potential investors.

The stop in Stanford was also significant as it was aimed at attracting the many IT businesses in the area surrounding the university, known worldwide as the Silicon Valley, to the MSC.

Dr Mahathir was equally optimistic on the potential of the MSC and its ability to attract investors.

While there were many other similar sounding programmes, none was as comprehensive as Malaysia's plan, he said.

The project covering an area measuring 15km by 50km from the Petronas Twin Towers of Kuala Lumpur City Centre to the new KL International Airport in Sepang, Selangor, will be a test site that seeks to look into the possibility of integrating IT in everyday life, from business to government and to individuals.

It will incorporate not only infrastructure but also the business and legislative aspects of IT. It will not only benefit Malaysia but also the companies located there and even perhaps the rest of the region.

Dr Mahathir said the decision to go big on IT stemmed from the need to prepare the country for the future, much like the shift from agriculture to manufacturing years ago.

"We have no choice. If we do not adapt to new technologies, we will be left behind."

The current practices would make Malaysia out of date very early as new technology requires a new approach towards industrialisation.

Before, the move to industrialisation had enabled the country to get some technology transfer as seen for example in the automotive industry. This is the idea behind the promotion of the IT industry and the concept behind the MSC.

"We will soon somehow or rather get the technology transferred (to Malaysians)," Dr Mahathir said.

He said the MSC was not just a place for big corporations. It was also to be a nurturing ground for start-up companies as long as they met the

requirements of the programme, he added.

To another question, Dr Mahathir said the Government had no problem having Malaysians who had been abroad returning home to work. They could even come back as expatriates if they were no longer citizens.

"We would welcome Malaysians and other people to come back to Malaysia."

On the Internet, he said Malaysia had no intention of censoring the vast amount of information on the World Wide Web as it would not only be impractical but also impossible to do so.

However, it would subscribe to any international code or laws of conduct governing the Internet should nations decide to check the proliferation of filth and seditious materials in cyberspace.

"(For the moment) we will allow free access to the Internet but the current laws still prevail," he said, adding that should a user transmit or distribute pornographic or illegal materials from the World Wide Web he could be charged for transgression.

He said a more effective way to combat abuses in cyberspace was by educating parents of young Internet users.

Censorship was difficult as it would not only be inefficient but at times erroneous. For example, he said, if censorship was used to bar any material with the word "sex", it would result in a blackout of any items even on Essex and Middlesex.

Earlier in his speech, Dr Mahathir said Malaysia had come late to industrialisation and had given it the will and skill to make sweeping changes that others could not because it had much less to lose.

"We may sound very ambitious for a small country, but America itself was a small country in the 19th century.

"At that time, England launched the Industrial Revolution but America won it. Why? Because the technology could be moved to an environment much more conducive to realising its full potential."

Dr Mahathir said the MSC provided all the critical components required to create the perfect environment to achieve the promise of the Information Age.

Today, he said, it was much easier to move technology and knowledge than it was 100 years ago.

He added that this was why Malaysia believed it could build the global bridge needed to move beyond the limits of the Industrial Age.

Later in the evening, Dr Mahathir hosted a dinner for the Malaysian delegation as well as members of the IT industry and academicians at a hotel in Santa Clara, California.

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