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Fortune: MSC portrays Asian ambitions in IT

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MALAYSIA'S Multimedia Super Corridor underscores Asian ambitions in information technology, Fortune magazine said in an article in its Aug 18 issue which is already on the newstands now.

Fortune devoted the bulk of its pages to Asian strides in information technology, saying that the region had the potential to leapfrog over some Western IT markets.

In an article titled "Malaysia - Building a Field of Dreams", the magazine also focused on Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's vision to bring the country to the frontlines of regional competition.

"Even if the corridor falls short of Malaysia's ambitions," the article said, "the country can hardly lose by providing infotech companies with a good working environment."

Dr Mahathir's plans to attract world-class foreign investors, it said, had paid off handsomely with about a dozen "significant global players" such as Sun Microsystems, Oracle and Microsoft agreeing to take part.

Attracting them to the MSC is a package including "tax breaks, fat government contracts, and all the infrastructure and intellectual climate that innovative companies need."

According to the article, such investment was needed to boost the corridor's potential, especially as Malaysia only ranked 35th out of 55 countries in a recent information society index.

It described the nation's efforts to catalyse the MSC with public works projects such as the Petronas Twin Towers, the new Kuala Lumpur International Airport, Putrajaya and Cyberjaya.

The article also stated that in many ways, they mirrored other projects in the region.

The RM5 billion investment in a high-capacity fibre-optic communications system for the MSC, for example, was described as a way of bringing Malaysia's infrastructure up to par with Hong Kong and Singapore.

The cybercity was also described as a means of redistributing traffic congestion now clogging Kuala Lumpur as much as it was a grand city of the future.

Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim was quoted as saying that Malaysian leaders were aware that there was much catching up to do.

"We don't claim to be geniuses or have expertise in this, but with some humility we can bring everything together," he said.

The article noted that the Government was complementing its package to foreign investors with a Multimedia Bill of Guarantees, part of which assures that all companies within the corridor will have free access to the Internet without censorship.

"Opening that door in a socially conservative, predominantly Muslim society demonstrates exceptional vision, and eventually Malaysia would like to stop having to police users outside the corridor," the article stated.

Anwar was quoted again as saying the Government appreciated that "there's a limit to what the Government should be able to manage and censor.

"The manner to deal with this is educating our own people, particularly in schools, so that they finally are able to decide for themselves," he said.

The article said that the biggest allure for foreign customers was the

possibility of winning fat contracts from the Government, and most likely to be the biggest customer for information services in the corridor.

"Rather than merely competing for contracts, leading companies are helping the Government define how to accomplish its cybergoals.

Advance warning from Dr Mahathir that companies which did not sign up for the MSC now would be barred from bidding on these contracts, the article said, had already been heeded.

"Already a team of 18 specialists from companies such as AT&T, Fujitsu, IBM and Netscape is helping to set up pilot projects for the electronic government concept.

However, the article stated that one potential problem was Malaysia's shortage of knowledge workers, although MSC movers are addressing it with a new Multimedia University run by Telekom Malaysia.

"Clearly," it said, "Malaysia has to energise its people to keep pace with a global information society."

The story also identified business tycoon T. Ananda Krishnan as a potential "homegrown version of Gates and Idei".

It cited his investments in the telecom, multimedia and satellite telecommunications industries and his plans to push these services into neighbouring countries.

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