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Mahathir-Acting

MAHATHIR SAYS HE'S NOT PREPARING TO STEP DOWN

By: Wan A.Hulaimi

LONDON, May 21 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad told participants at the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) conference here that his deputy's acting role as prime minister during his long absence from the country was not a preparation for his handing down his power.

Responding to a question from the audience after his keynote address at the MSC Investors' seminar at the Imperial Colleger here, Dr Mahathir began with a empathic "No", but conceded that the time would come "at some stage" when he would have to end his role as Prime Minister of Malaysia.

"No, it is not true I'm preparing to hand over power, but the fact still remains at some stage I have to stop being Prime Minister either by natural cause or voluntarily," he said.

He then added: "There's no way people can stay as Prime Minister even after he's dead".

The one-day conference at the Imperial College, the highlight of his five-day visit here to promote the Malaysian MSC projects was attended by more than 800 delegates from British universities and industries as well as by Malaysian entrepreneurs looking for partners to take Malaysia into this visionary venture into the next millennium.

In a satellite link-up with Cardiff, the capital of Wales, Dr Mahathir heard the chairman of the Welsh Development Authority describe Malaysia's MSC vision as "the best and boldest project in the world today".

Among the most frequently asked question from the audience in the Great Hall of the Imperial College as well as in Cardiff was how they could participate in the programme.

A questioner from Turkey was anxious to know if Malaysia would give preferential treatment in the MSC for less developed countries against giants in information technology such as the United States.

Dr Mahathir's reply was that the MSC would provide equal opportunities for all without special protection for the small companies as, after all even some of the giants of multi-media today started life in a garage before becoming big players that they are now.

"If we start protecting small companies then the big companies won't come," Dr Mahathir said.

He said that from here he would be going to the East Coast of the United States to meet with a number of companies which have expressed an interest to participate in the MSC and "would like to have a dialogue with us".

A number of contracts had already been signed and various undertakings given by these companies, Dr Mahathir said, but he could not yet give a date of his trip to the States to meet them.

As regards use of the new multimedia facilities in the MSC, he emphasised that there would be no censorship, but underlined the need to exercise caution when operating in a sensitive multi-racial environment such as Malaysia.

Asked by a journalist from the Financial Times on how he would reconcile his undertaking not to impose censorship in the MSC with his remark last year that journalists had a duty to shield the public from foreign propaganda, he replied:

"I don't think freedom of the press means a licence to do something that is harmful to the society. The press should agree to be self-censoring

or at least should be responsible."

A questioner asked if Malaysia had the "right kind of culture" to develop into multimedia to compare with multimedia in California in the West Coast of the United States where the culture is rock and roll.

"Malaysia hasn't, but the MSC can have that," Dr Mahathir replied.

"That is why we have designated a certain area for this. We have to see what will happen to society when we introduce the freedom that comes with the free movement of information," he added.

This answer underpinned a lot that there is in this MSC experiment, that it is a "test-bed" that is unique to the world and which is emphasised by Dr Mahathir many times in his answer to questions, and in his wish for the MSC to be Malaysia's gift to the world.

He said that there were things yet to be discussed with Asean countries at the next summit to explore the areas of cooperation.

On Cyber law, Dr Mahathir said that at the moment there are some aspects of the law which touched on multimedia development and use in some countries.

But in summing up the situation which Malaysia will meet in confronting the challenges of the MSC and the empirical nature of this experiment, he said:

"As we go along we're going to discover certain things which need to be covered by certain laws".

Again, in his reply to a question about Telekom Malaysia's "monopolistic" position as suppliers to the MSC, Dr Mahathir pondered about the areas yet to be explored.

While conceding that Telekom Malaysia would be called upon to provide the "backbone" to the project, anything added-on, value-added facilities would be by different companies, he said.

"As to future competition, we anticipate that, it is something which we cannot avoid. We really don't know how to handle this at the moment ... but everybody will have a piece of the works".

Asked if he had met any barriers to technology sharing from certain countries, he said that he had not but then he would not insist that companies participating in the MSC share their technology with Malaysia.

He added: It also depends on how you approach these people. Sometimes, persuasion might help, sometimes mild arm-twisting".

Even the multimedia university, started by Telekom Malaysia, would be open to everyone, he said.

"We have asked Telekom Malaysia to start it but faculties can be set up by anyone...other companies interested in providing education involving multimedia and information technology are welcome to participate either as a group or on their own.

"We provide the necessary environment for them, all the basic infrastructure will be in place and we may think of more than one university. There may be other institutions which may be set up by other companies if they so wish," he said.

He said setting up of the multimedia university would mark the change in emphasis in education in Malaysia from a strictly regulated instrument for the development of a national identity to an open system where everyone would have access to knowledge through modern electronic means.

Dr Mahathir said that it was difficult to control education in the country even if he was ready to admit that it was an "important instrument" for national identity.

"It's impossible to control education. People will go everywhere to seek knowledge."

Outlining the future, he said it would not be looked in terms of an increase in the population of student in campuses but by an increase in the

number of people with degrees.

The role of the multimedia was to devise teaching material that was easy to follow so that a lot more people could acquire knowledge in this new age of information technology, knowledge that could be absorbed more easily.

Education was not only for the brainy ones, but also for the half-brained, he said.

Speaking in a relaxed manner and capturing the mood of the audience with skill, Dr Mahathir brought laughter when he recalled his days at university when it was not only difficult sometimes for him to follow what the lecturers were saying but sometimes he could not even read his own handwriting.

Earlier, on censorship of the internet (which was impossible), he observed that some people had devised softwares to filter internet content but while this was fine, this could raise problems with "Sussex, Middlesex and Essex," he said to loud cheers.

Ending on this light-hearted note, he gave a typical response to a question why his vision extended only to 2020 and not beyond.

"We fixed on 2020 because I am a medical doctor and I understand what 2020 means. If I go beyond 2020, then my vision wouldn't be that good," he said. -- BERNAMA

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