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Special Report

MSC: FORERUNNER OF WHAT THE MUSLIM WORLD CAN DO FOR THEMSELVES

By: Ali Mamat

KUALA LUMPUR: The Multi-media Super Corridor (MSC) being developed at Putrajaya has captured the imagination of many people and some see it as a means for the country to take the shortest route to a developed status.

Although Malaysia is still considered a developing country, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Mahathir's initiative would fit well with his Vision 2020, said Mohammad Minhaj Khokhar, president of the Muslim Business Chamber of North America.

He saw the MSC as part of Dr Mahathir's shortcut to Malaysia's success, and vision to empower the Muslim world with technologies of the future.

"It is also a practical effort by a leader of a Muslim nation to close the wide gap between the prosperous and the backward countries," he said when speaking at the recently concluded World Islamic Business Leaders' Summit here.

Arguing that the gap between the rich and poor nations was actually in the level of Information Technology (IT), he said "without the electronic neural system, nations will be doomed to backwardness, no matter how many factories and smokestacks they have."

According to Mohammad, the Soviet Union collapsed because of the knowledge factor more than anything else, and this was admitted by its former president Gorbachev who said in 1989, "we were nearly one of the last to realize that in the age of information science, the most valuable asset is knowledge."

Looked at from another angle, he said the "gap" was not between the North and the South or the East and the West. But it was between how fast or how slow were nations in acquiring IT.

"Look around us and see which nations are prospering...the slow is poor while the fast is obviously rich," he said.

Mohammad stressed that with every click of the keyboard, nations that had embraced the electronic age were moving forward, while others were left far behind.

The slowness of the poor countries in embracing the electronic era was reflected in the lopsided distribution of telecommunication and electronic gadgets.

According to him, there were over 600 million telephones in the world in 1990 but 450 millions of them were in the hands of only nine countries.

In the meantime, he said, America continued to harness the powerful forces of science and technology, despite its super-power status. In a recent address to the nation, President Bill Clinton challenged the Americans to connect every classroom and library to the Internet by year 2000, so that all children in the most isolated rural towns, the most comfortable suburbs and the poorest inner-city schools would have same access to the same universe of knowledge.

Clinton went further by calling on Americans to strive to build the second generations of the Internet "so that our leading universities and national laboratories can communicate at speeds a thousand time faster than today's in the development of new medical treatments and new sources of energy."

Mohammad said in contrast, the Mali National Chamber of Commerce did not have even one computer in their office until one was donated to them in 1995.

"If the question about a nation's economic prosperity is related to the

informational and educational gap, where is the answer from the Muslim world?" Mohammad asked.

In reply to his own question, he said no matter how backward the Muslim world might be, there were shortcuts to success.

For example, he said, the less developed countries could now by-pass the entire cost of laying thousands of miles of cables for their telecommunication systems, by going straight to microwave technology, thereby saving millions of ringgits.

Quoting Japan as an example of a shortcutter, Mohammad said although the country was a late comer to space technology, it had successfully launched a telescope into space which is a million times more powerful than the American Hubbel telescope, thanks to knowledge obtained from the American themselves and also their own trial and error.

Likewise, he said, the Muslim world could be brought from despair to prosperity through proper coaching from existing Muslim business consultants.

Mohammad regretted that the thousands of Muslim doctors, scientists, mathematicians, industrialists and engineers in America had remained unknown to the Muslim world, despite their willingness to share their expertise with the Muslim brothers in all parts of the world and market their products in the Western markets.

He claimed that there were over 20,000 Muslim doctors in America and 40,000 Muslim scientists and engineers in California alone. One of the top mathematicians in the National Aeronautical and Space Agency (NASA) was a Muslim, so also was the head of the largest Kentucky Fried Chicken franchiser in USA.

According to Mohammad, chartered schools should be established by the Muslim world to produce about one million trained Muslim specialists every year, including 100,000 software developers to sustain the growth in information technologies.

Muslim countries, he added, must also find their own resources to install infrastructures, but the infrastructures must go beyond just installing telecommunication and computer systems.

"Establishment of our infrastructures does not mean that we create our own software or develop our own computers. We should take the best of what is already available from Taiwan, Japan, USA or any other place and adapt it for use to produce the final product that fits the needs of the market in general and the Muslim market in particular," he said.

Mohammad concluded that there was also an urgent need for the Muslim world to establish joint business think tanks to determine the needs, and identify resources, to fill the gaps.

Until and unless they began to sit together and work out things, the Muslim world would continue to suffer the same fate as the African continent.

"The developed countries have no interest in initiating market programs for African countries and according to many in the West, Africa may as well fall off the planet earth," Mohammad said. -- Bernama