

20/01/1997

MSC set to be gateway to dynamic, prosperous future

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SANTA CLARA, Sun: Not far from here is Stanford University, which will go down in history as being the place where minds met to plan Malaysia's brave arrival in the world of information technology (IT).

Never before had so many captains of the IT world, competitors in their own right, gathered in one room to shape the future of a nation. A mere two decades ago, Malaysia's economy had been dictated more by commodity prices than anything else.

The future will see the creation of an environment where the IT industry will form the backbone of a new way of life. Called the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC), it is a 15km-by-50km area next to Malaysia's capital, Kuala Lumpur.

Here, a pioneer environment will be created where paper transactions will be done away with: perhaps too, the word "filing cabinet" will also be erased from the residents' vocabulary.

It will be the launch pad for the IT transformation of an entire nation - the MSC will have fibre optic connections for veins and electronic pulses as blood.

By virtue of the latest infrastructure, the MSC will attract new age technologies, limited only by the power of thinking itself. Undoubtedly, this quantum leap will take many Malaysians by surprise and some aspects may be unpleasant.

"There is no gain without pain," said Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad at the conclusion of the inaugural meeting of the project's International Advisory Panel (IAP).

As the brain behind the MSC, he was the only politician among the IAP members.

Dr Mahathir, while fasting, had to deliver speech after speech to an always packed audience that never failed to grant him a standing ovation after each session.

On paper, it may seem quite absurd for Malaysia to promote IT and multimedia in a region where both were born. But Dr Mahathir's working visit this time was quite dissimilar to the many investment promotion missions he had undertaken thus far.

On this visit he had to channel ideas, listen to suggestions and provide an avenue for solutions. This time, he was more interested in listening to ideas than giving his.

He had to lead the Government into making available a conducive environment where IT and multimedia industries would flourish. The necessary physical infrastructure, new laws and unprecedented incentives as well as freedom for foreign investors involved in these fields - all these had to be ensured.

These promises have been documented in a 10-point Government Bill of Guarantee.

In return, the Government wants the leading IT and multimedia companies to look into the possibility of establishing themselves in the MSC.

There are no taxes, no investment allowance tax for the first decade of operating, no duties on multimedia equipment, no restrictions on hiring of foreign expertise - in short, there are no catches, whatsoever.

To prepare for the actual realisation of the MSC, several innovative measures have been put in place. For the first time anywhere, a set of laws will be enacted to specifically create the orderly development of IT

and its related industries.

Called Cyberlaws, they will pave the way for the introduction of revolutionary applications of IT in such areas as telemedicine, distance learning, computer crime, intellectual property rights, digital signature and a paperless government.

When laws are formulated, this indicates solid involvement of the Government, a key factor in the successful conclusion of the inaugural IAP meeting.

Many members of the IAP are attracted by the Government's commitment to the project and many have also expressed immediate interest in locating their units here.

Dr Mahathir's working visit also took him to the heart of the world's entertainment industry, Hollywood, which makes extensive use of IT today.

In his speech, he called upon Hollywood's creative talents to look at opportunities in the MSC. This suggestion was well received and one company expressed interest in using the area as a source for creation of more Asian content for digital-based productions.

The Prime Minister offered usage of the MSC as a centre for collaborating entertainment production ideas from within the Asian region for final production in Hollywood and consequently, distribution throughout the world.

The days of an increasingly affluent Asia totally swallowing whatever is produced at Hollywood studios are numbered and such productions are not in line with the inner-self requirements of Asians, the Prime Minister said.

Hollywood must venture out, to inject more Asian content into its productions as well as computer-generated ones to retain its leading edge in the entertainment industry. Thus, what better way than to locate a centre for generation of such content in Asia, and where in Asia, but the MSC itself?

This time around, also, the visit to this part of the world has been the least exasperating for the Prime Minister, as far as the foreign media are concerned.

He had to answer few cynical questions, for there was indeed not much to ask.

Whatever scepticisms were voiced, were dealt with by the IAP members, who replied optimistically.

Not even one member of the IAP seemed eager to go in front of television cameras, photographers and reporters. They had come to an informal agreement of sorts that the meeting was not about gaining individual prominence, but rather for seriously noting down ideas on a common cause.

Overheard at the press conference after the meeting was the Prime Minister's conversation with an IAP member. "You must be very tired," the member told Dr Mahathir.

"Well, I still have Tokyo to cover," the Prime Minister replied, describing the two-day stopover he would make in Tokyo on his way back: he is going to listen to more ideas from potential investors in Japan.

With the extreme care that is being exerted by Malaysia to ensure the MSC's success, the corridor should indeed become the gateway to a dynamic, prosperous future.

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