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Potential MSC-related ventures

Francis C. Nantha

IT has been a busy eight days for the Multimedia Super Corridor initiative, starting with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad performing the ground-breaking ceremony for Cyberjaya two Saturdays ago.

Then, even though he was on leave, Dr Mahathir flew to London where he presented the MSC project to British and European interests.

He also witnessed the signing of several memorandums of understanding, which should lead to more projects within the MSC area.

Telekom Malaysia Bhd signed MoUs with Italian companies Marconi SpA and GEC-Marconi Ltd aimed at enhancing Malaysia's research in advanced telecommunications networks.

This would see the setting up of a laboratory at the MSC to carry out research and develop advanced technologies for telecommunications networks.

Also, the MSC-related venture will pursue the development of special devices to overcome some existing technological hurdles so as to enable the use of copper cables to transmit video images.

The second MoU would see Telekom Malaysia and GEC-Marconi looking into the possibility of setting up a US\$115 million (RM287.5 million) plant at the MSC area.

Usages of this semi-conductor are for very high technologies and transfer of signals at high frequency - mainly applications involving transmission by microwave, satellite and in smart cards, requiring power at low levels.

Then, an agreement was signed between TL Technology Research (M) Sdn Bhd, E-pass International Ltd of London - a subsidiary of Xanadu plc - and Iris Securities.

This is to produce a "wallet personal computer" following the design of a product patented in 39 countries, including the US and Europe.

Essentially, it is a smart card envisioned as being one of the key applications to be introduced in the MSC area.

A brief discourse of the multi-purpose smart card the size of a credit card which compresses many functions into it has been featured before in this column, including some of the privacy issues that have to be addressed.

In short, it can be used as a credit card, for cashless payments, membership card, access control and passport, health and personal data card, and on buses and trains.

It aims to do away with an individual having to carry money, as well as items that provide mobile information and communications, such as a watch, newspapers or other reading materials, address and appointment books, photographs, calculator, portable telephone and pager.

About the only new feature is that the wallet PC also acts as a personal computer, but this venture need not necessarily mean this smart card will be the one used within the MSC area.

The e-pass wallet PC plant will be set up with an initial investment of STG6 million (RM24 million) and is expected to get off the ground by the end of next year. The "blank" cards are largely for export and are expected to be out by the end of the year.

Meanwhile, Ascom AG and Lityan Holdings Berhad will look into borderless marketing, using the MSC as a launching pad for promoting its products and services in the region and around the world.

And on the educational and training front, new ventures have been forged between GBN Consulting (M) Sdn Bhd and John Fripp & Associates, RQ Net Sdn Bhd and The University of Central London, and Land & General Berhad, Utusan Melayu (M) Bhd and New Media Press Ltd.

Other ventures signed involved Team Vantage Sdn Bhd, Siemens AG, SCS Computer Systems Sdn Bhd, Sema Group, Unico Technology Bhd, Plextek Ltd, KUB Malaysia Bhd, Krone AG, Abrar Group International Sdn Bhd, Lagardere, CSE Avel-Tech Sdn Bhd, Thomson-SCF Communication, Securicor Datatrak Ltd, PNB Equity Resource, Federal Power Sdn Bhd and FibreCore Inc.

Then, to cap it off, Ericsson's president and chief executive officer Dr Lars Ramqvist became the latest adviser appointed to the MSC's International Advisory Panel.

And Ericsson plans to set up a plant in the MSC area within the next seven years.

So, what else can we expect?

An indication came from the MSC co-ordinating body, Multimedia Development Corporation, when its chairman Tan Sri Dr Othman Yeop Abdullah said on Friday that only 14 applications for the MSC status had been granted out of the 963 received so far.

The strict criteria adopted by the MDC means that not everyone can pass off their ventures as being MSC-related unless there are specific reasons why they should be seen as enhancing the nation's futuristic initiative.

As suggested in this column last Sunday, coming up with ventures with clear reference to the MSC is not too difficult as long as the effort has been put in for distinct advantages to be gained via the MSC initiative.

Adding to these examples is that of a report by Reuters last week, which stated that Canadian company King Products Inc has developed multimedia and Internet-ready pay phones.

The firm has already received an initial US\$2.2 million (RM5.5 million) order from INFA Telecom Asia Ltd of Hong Kong to enable public phone users to gain access to the World Wide Web.

Called the PowerPhone, the units will be installed in the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre in time for the July 1 handover ceremony marking the transfer of the former British colony to China.

The PowerPhone will also be installed in railway stations and other popular tourist spots in Hong Kong and throughout China.

The wall-mounted unit is a combination pay phone and networked computer that allows the display of such things as advertising, telephone directories as well as hotel and restaurant reservations.

The phone can also be used to find a restaurant, make a reservation or call up a map for directions.

Further, the phones will allow users to send and receive e-mail and surf the Internet, although these features will be phased in over time.

The phone comes with a handset, a flat panel colour touch screen and a slot for smart cards and credit cards. It is powered by an Intel Corporation's Pentium processor and uses various Internet and Ethernet protocols as well as an MPEG card to run videos.

Another potential MSC-related venture, with apologies to the local telecommunications firms, is the development of a telephony service which can allow the user to make international calls over the Internet at the cost of a local call charge.

It is not difficult to do so. All one needs is to set up an operational centre here with Internet access, which the caller can then dial up to from any telephone and then be linked up to an overseas number.

Of course, there will also be the need to set up similar call centres on the receiving end to link up the Internet call to the number the caller wishes to contact.

To ensure this service is successful, a string of alliances would, of course, need to be forged with many overseas partners so as to ensure the start-up costs are low.

So, any takers for more MSC-related projects?

* The writer can be contacted at nstbiz@bb.nstp.com.my

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