

06/10/1997

The importance of telecommunications systems

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BUENOS AIRES: A journalist's nightmare when covering major events outside the country is discovering that the telecommunications system is not functioning.

Telecommunications is the single most important factor that determines whether the journey of a thousand kilometres and costing tens of thousands of ringgit is a success or failure.

Therefore, it was with considerable trepidation that I went to Cuba (pronounced Kuba by the local people) a week ago to cover Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's first visit to the Caribbean nation, which incidentally was also the first by a Malaysian Prime Minister.

After an uneventful, smooth 20-hour plus flight on a chartered Malaysia Airlines 747-400 aircraft via Madrid, touching down at Havana's (pronounced Habana) Jose Marti Airport did little to raise my spirits.

In fact, looking at the engineless Russian-made aircraft parked on the grass verge and the run-down terminal buildings, which were similar to the scene at Russian airports and airports of the former Soviet states, raised a big question mark about the workability of Cuba's telecommunications system.

It seems that in the old Soviet Union, state-owned aircraft factories produced more planes than needed, but the engines, which are more difficult and costly to build, were in short supply.

So the first thing that the journalists who followed the Prime Minister did upon checking-in at Havana's Melia Cohiba Hotel was to test the telephone system.

Voila! It worked like a breeze. Getting in touch with Kuala Lumpur and sending our reports back using the laptop computers were effortless.

The verdict from the media people, whether they communicated using computer, facsimile or telephone, was unanimous: the telecommunications system in Cuba - or at least at the Melia Cohiba Hotel - was the best they had ever come across.

This was the first important lesson we learnt during the 12-day visit that also included Chile, Uruguay and Argentina - that in the era of information technology, a country, company or an individual does not have to be technologically advanced to own the best telecommunications systems and IT products.

According to sources, the Melia Cohiba Hotel, being relatively new, was able to install the latest telecommunications system for the comfort of its guests.

And, as proof of the fact that the world is being made borderless by the ease of travel and communications, CNN and US TV programmes are all available at the hotel.

Castro's socialist haven is not as closed and uncompromising as is often portrayed by the Western media. The people are friendly, educated, well-fed and generally healthy. And the US dollar is accepted everywhere.

The Cuban experience strengthens my belief that the Multimedia Super Corridor will work. If we are able to put in place the best and latest in IT technology, and bring in the best and most creative brains, the MSC and Cyberjaya stand a good chance of duplicating the monumental success of America's Silicon Valley.

When I visited Santa Clara in early 1980s to call on such institutions as the Stanford University and a handful of semiconductor manufacturers

and IT companies, I had not imagined that just over a decade later I would be sending my reports and columns back to Kuala Lumpur using a normal telephone line and a laptop from my parents' house in a village in Kedah.

When I left that kampung in 1969 to seek fame and fortune in Kuala Lumpur - wasn't that every young person's dream after finishing school? - it had no running water and electricity. The only telecommunications facility available was the solitary public telephone.

Yet, when we arrived in Santiago, the capital of the more modern and economically advanced Chile, the relatively new hotel we lived in did not have a telecommunications system that could transmit data using laptops. The most sophisticated communications method it offered was the fax.

This is partly because Chile, being more advanced, had its telephone and telecommunications system a long time ago and it is now slowly becoming obsolete.

No such problem was encountered in Uruguay and Argentina. All that you need to do is to reprogramme the computer to chart its way through the system.

In the age of IT, in which the world is virtually borderless and business is conducted at "virtual offices" (the hotel rooms and secluded beaches), our understanding of telecommunications is crucial.

Unfortunately, despite the Government talking about the virtual and paperless office, many civil servants, including those managing the media during international visits by the Prime Minister, think journalists still lug the old, tired typewriter around with them.

I hope Wisma Putra will take note of this. Accomodating journalists away from the Prime Minister and in hotels with poor telecommunications facilities defeats the entire exercise of inviting the Press to cover his visits.

Since the media companies pay for their representatives to cover these visits, it is important that their job is facilitated by ensuring that they have access to good telecommunications systems.

When the Prime Minister visited the then Soviet Union in 1987, the "Press Officer" assigned to the Malaysian Press team did not even know what a telex machine was. Obviously he was not a genuine Press Officer.

And I was told by an Argentinian journalist friend who attended the Prime Minister's Press conference in Buenos Aires that the English/Spanish translation of the proceeding left much to be desired.

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