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A gift to the world

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WHEN Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad first unveiled the blueprint for the ambitious Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) in August 1996, scepticism greeted him. It'll crumble into dust, they said. All in the air, pooh-poohed others.

Maybe the concept itself was too bold to be absorbed by the unimaginative mind. But then, many cannot visualise cyber economy even as we are fast heading towards a 'wired' world where information economy is based on the interconnections linking and re-linking millions of users of millions of computers.

Nevertheless, when Dr Mahathir presented the MSC to information technology (IT) and multimedia biggies from Silicon Valley at California's University of Stanford in February 1997, many were hooked. Even the king of techies, Microsoft's Bill Gates, is enamoured by it.

That many were enticed by the concept - and willing to park their money in the MSC - shows that the allure of the MSC is not a fanciful notion. It is, as oft-mentioned by Dr Mahathir, 'an exciting endeavour'. Or, as Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim describes it, 'Malaysia's gift to the world'.

In a flash, the MSC has become a buzzword. Yet, as many a layman complains, people only have a vague notion of it, although they have a clear understanding that it will propel the country into the IT Age. So, what exactly is the MSC?

The MSC is designed to provide four key elements which will ultimately also determine its success: top-class physical infrastructure with intelligent cities within an attractive living environment; the world's best soft infrastructure in support of cyber laws, policies and practices; next-generation telecommunication networks with a five-gigabit international gateway; and a one-stop super shop, the Multimedia Development Corporation (MDC) to facilitate participation and partnerships.

An imaginary realm of Homer's gods? If cyberspace cannot be visualised, think of MSC's physical structure as the one that traps the intelligent hub into our terrestrial world. It is a length of greenfield corridor, 15 kms wide and 50 kms long, that starts from the Kuala Lumpur City Centre/KLCC - itself an intelligent precinct, housing the world's tallest buildings - down south to the site of the region's largest international airport, the Kuala Lumpur International Airport/KLIA.

Then, there are the two smart cities which are currently being developed in the corridor. Firstly, Putrajaya - the new seat of government and administrative capital where the concept of electronic government will be introduced. Secondly, Cyberjaya - an intelligent city with multimedia industries, research and development centres, a multimedia university and operational headquarters for multinationals wishing to direct their worldwide manufacturing and trading activities using multimedia technology.

The MSC is ideally set to be a vehicle for attracting world-class technology-led companies to Malaysia, and developing local industries. A multimedia Utopia offering a productive, intelligent environment within which a multimedia value chain of goods and services will be produced and delivered across the globe. And most importantly, a test bed for invention, research and ground-breaking multimedia developments

spearheaded by seven multimedia applications.

A key factor that has attracted global attention to the MSC is the 10-point Bill of Guarantees which reflects the government's commitment to this ambitious project. The Bill of Guarantees ensures MSC-status companies enjoy certain privileges (see box).

Another global attention grabber is the MSC's legislative framework and supporting soft infrastructure in the form of the world-first cyber laws. The legal and regulatory environment has three focal points; protecting the rights of citizens, the interest of businesses and the integrity and soundness of the flagship applications.

The new cyber laws and cyber policies are at different stages of enactment and include the Digital Signatures Act to facilitate electronic commerce in the areas of digital contracts, digital signatures, cyber payments and intellectual property protection; the Computer Crimes Act which aims to clearly define cyberfraud, unauthorised access, interception, illegal use of computers as crime and provide special rights of interception to law enforcement agencies; the Copyright Amendment Act (to be enforced by the Ministry of Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs) which aims to guarantee full copyright protection for multimedia works; the Telemedicine Act which spells out who are the qualified personnel to practise telemedicine and the associated legal liabilities for misconduct; and the Electronic Government Act which will guide the implementation of electronic government as a flagship application. A Multimedia and Communication Act is also in place.

To top it all, an Asean Cyber Law Institute and Cyber Court of Arbitration is also in the making. This will be the centre for drafting future cyber laws within the global cyber law framework, and co-operating with other Asean countries in developing a regional cyber law system. The flagship applications identified for the MSC makes it an ideal global test bed for multimedia and IT development. (See table.)