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Malaysia's future fast taking shape

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JUST south of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia's bet for the next millennium is rapidly taking concrete shape. While the soaring pinnacles of the Petronas Twin Towers and the nature-friendly new Kuala Lumpur International Airport are already in place, work is ahead of schedule on the other components of the vehicle that will drive Malaysia into the information technology (IT) age.

In an amazingly short time, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's vision of building a world-class multimedia hub from scratch to take Malaysia into the 21st century is turning into reality.

Within a year, the new 'intelligent' government administrative centre of Putrajaya and the IT-driven residential, commercial and educational centre of Cyberjaya will complete the recipe that will go into making the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC).

Covering an area 15km wide by 50km, running from the Petronas Towers - at 474 metres the world's tallest building - right up to the new international airport in Sepang, the MSC aims to offer an attractive home to the world's leading IT and multimedia companies.

Eventually the government hopes the MSC will become a global business centre where the big players in multimedia and IT will locate their regional business units. The MSC will be a place where multimedia products and services are created, used, and improved to serve regional and world markets.

To get into the MSC, companies will have to be providers or heavy users of multimedia products and services, or be engaged in research and development. They also have to employ a substantial number of knowledge and IT-based workers.

Thus far about 113 companies have been granted 'MSC status', which entitles them to a 10-point Bill of Guarantee and various financial and non-financial incentives to make it worth their while to take the MSC seriously.

The Bill of Guarantee is a reflection of the government's commitment to the MSC. Its 10 points include promises that companies in the MSC will have world-class physical and information infrastructure, unrestricted freedom to hire non-Malaysians, freedom of ownership, freedom of global access to capital resources and other financial incentives.

It also guarantees that companies will receive protection of intellectual property rights through new laws, cheap telecom tariffs, no censorship of the Internet, and implementation and enforcement of MSC rules and regulations by a high-powered agency.

As an additional lure to get the biggest foreign fish in - and some pretty big fish have been hooked - the government has also passed the world's first cyberlaws. Specifically written to address the possible legal needs of multimedia and IT companies, the cyberlaws are intended to create a stable environment conducive to MSC-companies. It seeks to promote the development of electronic commerce and other multimedia applications and services, besides ensuring intellectual property rights.

Nonetheless while the ink on paper might look good to everyone, it will be the actual ability of the government to deliver the goods it promised that will decide whether the MSC becomes a new IT capital of the world.

Investors Digest recently had a tour of Putrajaya and its Siamese twin Cyberjaya, thanks to the people at Tenaga Nasional Bhd, which revealed

that economic crisis notwithstanding, the people entrusted to deliver the world-class physical and information infrastructure in the MSC have things very much in control.

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